

Talking about violent extremism: Experiences of Canadian secondary school teachers in four metropolitan areas

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives and experiences of Canadian secondary school teachers around violent extremism through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 30 (n=30) teachers from Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. The findings reveal unanimous eagerness among participants to engage with controversial subjects, yet almost all of them exhibit discomfort in addressing violent extremism, primarily due to perceived deficiencies in their expertise and training in this area. Some teachers show reluctance to address these topics to avoid excluding or marginalizing specific student groups, notably Muslims. Interestingly, a minority of teachers suggest that white students are immune to radicalization. They also expose unconscious biases concerning radicalization among religious minority students, especially Muslims, reflecting dominant discourses around radicalization and Islam. Moreover, there exists dissent regarding the necessity of addressing radicalization in schools that seemingly lack youth radicalization, mirroring a reactive discourse in preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Alarming, some participants report Islamophobia among their colleagues, highlighting an urgent issue that needs attention. Drawing from these insights, the study advocates for comprehensive teacher training on violent extremism and emphasizes the importance of collaboration between schools, parents, and local education ministries. It also criticizes Canada's National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence for its shortcomings and calls for a more robust and inclusive approach to P/CVE. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to integrate an ethic of care into educational practices, fostering an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and supported.

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Introduction

Academics, universities, counselors, and psychologists... They don't see it. They are so far stuck in the black and white of the textbooks. They miss it; they miss the real human side...they miss the real needs that everybody has...
– Christianne Boudreau²

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² Christianne Boudreau is the mother of Canadian youth Damian Clairmont, who joined ISIS in 2012. She shares her insights with Extreme Dialogue on her son's path to radicalization and her oversight of the warning signs

Radicalization leading to violent extremism or terrorism has emerged as a significant concern for policymakers, academics, and practitioners in the West, sparking contentious discussions among these stakeholders, particularly following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) prompted European and North American nations to significantly bolster their efforts in preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), notably since 2015, following the Paris attacks (Benmelech & Klor, 2020; Silva & Deflem, 2020; U.N. General Assembly, 2015). As of December 2015, estimations suggest that ISIS recruited approximately 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries (Benmelech & Klor, 2020). According to Public Safety Canada (2017), by 2017, over 190 Canadians had joined foreign terrorist groups affiliated with various extremist groups, and around 100 of them were involved in ISIS. Overall, the Canadian government acknowledged 250 Canadian extremist travelers (Harris-Hogan, Amarasingam & Dawson, 2022). Until that period, most of the state, public, and academic investigations in the West had concentrated on Islamist terrorist organizations recruiting Western individuals (Silva & Deflem, 2020; U.N. General Assembly, 2015). Despite the escalating incidents linked to right-wing extremism in the decades leading up to this period, the threat posed by the extreme right received considerably less attention compared to Islamist extremism (Koehler, 2016). Several scholars argue that the rise of Trump revived and amplified the voices of right-wing extremist groups in the US and other Western countries, which had remained relatively under the radar for the previous decades (Davey, Hart & Guerin, 2020; Floridi, 2021; Hawdon et al., 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Stevenson, 2019). The sharp rise of hatred and violent events against minority religious groups, such as Muslims and Jews, and other minoritized groups during and after the Trump administration in North America are not considered accidental by many. Some describe such a trend using the term the ‘Trump effect’ (e.g., Perry, Scrivens & Tanner, 2019, p.143; Solyom, 2016). In Canada, the Quebec mosque attack in 2017 and the London, Ontario truck attack in 2021, which resulted in the loss of six and four innocent lives, respectively, can be seen as a few typical examples of such “effect” (Aziz & Carvin, 2022; CBC, 2022).

preceding his departure for Syria. Emphasizing the inadequate awareness and responses of educational institutions in Canada with regard to radicalization or violent extremism, she sheds light on the crucial need for a critical understanding of this issue. For more information, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFAKam_olzw

That said, it would be naïve or even hazardous to assume that the fall of Trump in 2020 indicates “a return to normalcy” because “the broader normalization of far-right discourse” in mainstream politics during the Trump administration was profound (Mondon & Vaughan, 2021). Although the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic and series of lockdowns may have significantly diminished the influence of such groups, who heavily depend on public rallies, as some scholars argue, the very pandemic also became a tool for these groups to mainstream and amplify their voices in the form of anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown, or other relevant conspiracy theories in North America and beyond (e.g., Ackerman & Peterson, 2020; Davies et al., 2023). Meanwhile, it is possible that the pandemic may have increased the vulnerability of youth becoming victims of radicalization in Western countries, as suggested by Ackerman and Peterson (2020). Such direct impacts of the pandemic on violent extremism may dissipate with the end of this health crisis. However, some of its sociocultural, economic, and political implications may last long (Marone, 2022).

Since the mid-2000s, many European countries have started to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of educational institutions in addressing violent extremism. For example, after the London (UK) Bombings of 2005, The UK and the Netherlands first began to promote preventative and ‘softer’ approaches to counter-terrorism, and soon other European nations, as well as the UN, adopted similar measures (Ragazzi, 2017). The UK’s Prevent Strategy, initiated in 2003, can be seen as one of the earliest projects formulated in response to “homegrown terrorism” in a Western context. According to the Strategy, teachers and other staff members are expected to identify students who may be inclined to radicalization, while the teachers must promote fundamental British values among their students so that they become more resilient against extremist ideologies (Abbas, Awan & Marsden, 2021; Sardoč et al., 2022).

The Strategy includes the following three general goals.

1. “respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat [faced] from those who promote it;
2. prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support;

3. work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalization which we need to address” (HM Government 2011, p.1).

Canada's Counter-terrorism Strategy, published in 2013 (Public Safety Canada, 2013), does not even mention the word “education.” Canada’s most recent National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence (Government of Canada, 2018) tangentially acknowledges the role of education in building resilience against violent extremism, highlighting a collaborative approach, which is based on the collective efforts of “front-line workers, such as health and social service providers, teachers and other professionals in the education system, faith leaders, as well as parents, friends and community members” (p. 21). It does not offer specific educational content and pedagogical methods that can directly contribute to the efforts of P/CVE. Currently, Canada lacks a dedicated P/CVE program designed for formal education and educational institutions for P/CVE purposes. Nor is it discussed in teacher education programs. Instead, Canada has some government and non-government organizations dedicated to such goals through informal approaches. For example, the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (Canada Centre), part of Public Safety Canada, provides national policy leadership, supports local initiatives, and coordinates research to counter radicalization to violence. Centre on Hate, Bias, and Extremism (CHBE) aims to raise awareness, understanding, and prevention of hate, bias, and extremism by conducting research that informs evidence-based policies and practices. Centre de prévention de la radicalisation menant à la violence (CPRMV) is dedicated to educating and supporting the people of Montreal and Quebec through an accessible, community-based approach, collaborating with diverse partners, and leveraging scientific and practical expertise. The Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV) is a non-government research organization focusing on understanding and preventing hate-motivated violence, including violent extremism. Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) is an evidence-based non-government network that aims to foster leadership by promoting best practices and collaborative interdisciplinarity among researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and various community sectors.

Rationale for the study

The rise in hate crimes, violence in schools and society, and terrorist acts by extremist individuals, groups, or state actors threaten the security of individuals and nations (Combs, 2022). As mentioned above, Western nations, in particular, are broadening their efforts with comprehensive approaches to counter and prevent violent extremist acts. Education is and should be seen as a soft approach to supplement complex measures to counter violent extremism. Teachers have a pivotal role in this endeavor because they not only encourage, nurture, and challenge students to acquire knowledge, but they influence student behavior and impact their life trajectories.

While there is widespread acknowledgment of the potential role of education in preventing violent extremism, there has been a notable absence of substantive discussion among academics and policymakers regarding how teachers, along with other stakeholders, should effectively approach and address this issue within educational settings (Baak et al., 2022). A critical issue in the literature on extremism and education is the severe lack of data from educators. Our empirical study, which focuses on the perspectives and experiences of Canadian secondary school ³ teachers in four major metropolitan areas regarding violent extremism, aims to address this gap and make a substantial contribution to this vital field of research.

Given that teachers have a tremendous responsibility to shape future generations, their preparedness to teach is crucial. As social challenges change with globalization and increasing geo-political developments, teaching programs and skills must keep up to meet the transformations. While leaps in technology that demand very different skills have been recognized in schools to match ever-evolving economic and job needs, problems such as anti-social behaviors have not been given equal importance. As our study shows, teachers do not have enough knowledge or information in this area, so they do not feel confident discussing controversial topics such as violent extremism. Moreover, teachers may have biased views or perceptions on such topics because of their upbringing or the influence of media. They may bring conscious or unconscious bias in teaching, particularly in diverse classrooms. This

³ In most Canadian provinces and territories, secondary school, also known as high school, covers grades 8, 9, or 10 through grade 12. However, in Quebec, high school starts at grade 7 and ends at grade 11.

could result in excluding or marginalizing certain students, thus pushing them towards anti-social activities. Furthermore, teachers may not have enough knowledge about political and social developments, which leads them to think that discussing specific topics is not important. This can have counterproductive impacts on some students.

As mentioned earlier, in Canada, right-wing/nationalistic groups and individuals have been active for several years. Yet, perhaps because their actions have not been recognized as terrorism by the government until very recently, these people have not been seen as dangerous as conventional terrorists. Members of such groups that commit violence have been educated in Canadian schools, thus, this should be a matter of great concern to Canadian educators, policymakers, parents, and society at large. This research study will inform teacher education program development as well as policymakers so that pre-service education programs and professional development workshops for in-service teachers are guided by its findings and recommendations.

Theoretical perspectives

In recent years, the role of education in addressing violent extremism has garnered significant attention in academia, yet there remains considerable work to be done in this area (Duckworth, 2024; Sajjad, 2022; Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023). While efforts to combat violent extremism in North America have predominantly relied on reactive, coercive, and aggressive state measures, such as surveillance, policing, and military interventions, the potential role of education as a preventative strategy has been largely overlooked and underestimated (Davies, 2016; Duckworth, 2024; Ghosh et al., 2017; Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023). However, extremist groups have adeptly exploited educational platforms to disseminate their radical ideologies and recruit followers within Western societies. Many scholars have highlighted the systematic utilization of education by extremist organizations to indoctrinate individuals and foster allegiance to their causes. These groups utilize informal education through various new and creative channels, both online and offline, to propagate false and distorted narratives and exploit vulnerable young populations (Alava, Frau-Meigs &

Hassan, 2017; Davey, et al., 2020; Mahmut, Dhali & Ghosh, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018; Koehler, 2014; Koehler, Fiebig & Jugl, 2022).

The proliferation of violent extremism can be triggered by a complex interplay of push and pull factors, as elucidated by Ghosh and colleagues (2017). Push factors encompass socio-economic disparities, political grievances, identity crises, and (perceived) marginalization, which create fertile ground for individuals susceptible to violent extremist ideologies. On the other hand, pull factors may include promises of a sense of belonging, purpose, empowerment, and rectification of (perceived) historical and social injustices extended by violent extremist groups. Comprehending these factors is crucial for formulating effective counter-radicalization strategies that tackle the underlying causes of the problem (DeWall, et al., 2011; Maraj, Mahmut & Ghosh, 2021). We believe that two theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the cognitive and ethical dimensions of violent extremism: the Ethics of Care proposed by Noddings (1988, 1992, 2001) and the Moral Disengagement Theory articulated by Bandura (1999, 2002). The Ethics of Care underscores the significance of nurturing empathetic relationships and fostering a culture of care within communities, which can serve as a mechanism for preventing radicalization. By prioritizing compassion, mutual respect, and interconnectedness, this framework provides a human-centered and humanistic approach to countering violent extremism rooted in ethical principles (Ghosh, 2023).

Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory sheds light on the cognitive process through which individuals lose their moral agency and justify or rationalize their engagement in violent behaviors. According to Bandura (1999, 2002), individuals may disengage from moral standards and self-regulatory processes through mechanisms such as moral justification, dehumanization of victims, euphemistic labeling, and diffusion of responsibility, thereby facilitating their involvement in violent acts. With this in mind, we seek to understand how teachers approach deviant behavior, particularly signs of radicalization among their students, as we believe these signs can be indications of moral disengagement, which may lead to violent extremism. By doing so, we also examine if and how students respect school rules, recognize their classmates with different backgrounds, comprehend controversial issues, and express deviant ideologies through words and actions. By focusing on these indicators, we

aim to uncover the strategies teachers use, if any, to address and mitigate early signs of moral disengagement among their students.

For this research project, which looks at education's role in preventing violent extremist behavior in students, it is imperative that teachers understand their impact on both the push and pull factors that students may experience. One important push factor is students' feelings of isolation, marginalization, and discrimination (Ghosh et al., 2017). Teachers are significant in making classrooms inclusive, and students feel they belong. The Ethics of Care underscores the significance of nurturing empathetic relationships and fostering a culture of care within communities, which can serve as a mechanism for preventing radicalization. When students feel shunned, they withdraw from peer groups and seek inclusion elsewhere. One easy place to find people who are eager to recruit lonely souls into their extremist organizations is the internet, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. The need to 'belong' is intrinsic in human beings (DeWall et al., 2011). Predators lure students who feel excluded by attracting them to a community that will look after them. To prevent this from happening, teachers not only need to have inclusive classrooms but also teach critical media literacy skills that will enable students to spot dangerous propaganda and fake news. Teachers must be taught to aim at engaging students so that they do not go down the dangerous path of believing in justifications for violent behavior.

The absence of a caring and supportive environment may leave individuals feeling marginalized and disconnected, increasing their susceptibility to moral disengagement. In other words, when individuals perceive a lack of fairness, empathy, and support, they may be more inclined to ethically justify violence (Hoffman, 2000; van den Boss, 2020). Thus, fostering a culture of care within communities can serve as a protective factor against moral disengagement and ultimately contribute to countering violent extremism (Mahmut et al., 2019). Integrating these theoretical perspectives, education emerges as a powerful instrument for countering violent extremism on multiple fronts. By incorporating principles of care ethics into educational curricula and fostering inclusive learning environments, educators can cultivate empathy, critical/ethical thinking skills, and social responsibility among students, thereby reducing their susceptibility to violent extremist ideologies.

Methodology and methods

This is a qualitative study featuring the voices of 30 participants who responded to our interview questions in either one-on-one sessions or focus groups. These questions were designed to guide their responses without imposing any restrictions. We regard their voices as narrative. By "narrative," we emphasize the conversational and even storytelling nature of our data, as many participants wanted to share their lived experiences related to their work or personal lives. Inevitably, this process entails critical discourse analysis, which delves into macro-level or systemic factors shaping everyday narratives. Moreover, as De Fina (2003) argues, qualitative studies, particularly those based on narrative analysis, offer deeper insights into people's subjectivities, voices, and identities than quantitative methodologies. Hence, we rely on the critical narrative analysis methodology, combining critical discourse analysis with narrative analysis, to acknowledge the influence of systemic discourses on individual narrative identities while recognizing the potential of personal narratives to contest and reshape these systemic discourses (Souto-Manning, 2014).

The Research Ethics Board of McGill University approved this study under file number REB 21-02-020. The ethics approval was renewed each year between 2016 and 2022. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions of 30 (n=30) Canadian secondary school teachers in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver metropolitan areas. Initially, we planned to recruit participants through various school boards. However, only a couple of boards accepted our ethics application for researching their school population. Most of them rejected our proposal, citing concerns about the safety or security of their students. Strikingly, one English language school board in Quebec openly recommended that we look at the French language school system as "most immigrants go to French schools." The message behind this recommendation is that immigrants (mostly Muslims in this case)⁴ are more prone to becoming radicalized; therefore, studies related to P/CVE should focus on them. While feeling extremely disappointed by such a response, we regard it as part

⁴ Under Quebec's Charter of the French language, children of immigrants are not automatically eligible to attend English language public schools in Quebec. This is to protect and enhance the status of the French language in Quebec. For more information, see <https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/contenus-communs/parents-and-guardians/instruction-in-english/eligibility>

of research findings; anti-immigrant/Muslim biases concerning violent extremism appear to be systemic in Canada, especially in Quebec.

We recruited participants by reaching out directly to teachers we knew or through our contacts who were acquainted with some teachers, while also relying on the snowball method. To minimize selection bias, we ensured that we included at least six teachers from each metropolitan area and representatives from as many schools as possible. There are obvious limitations of the sample, which will be addressed in more detail in the discussion section. We ensured anonymity by withholding teachers' names, schools, genders, and ages. Instead, we assigned them simple tokens that only indicated the metropolitan area where they were working during the interview. For example, a simple token MT1 refers to a teacher from the Montreal area. In other words, the letter 'M' represents Montreal, the letter 'T' represents teacher, and the number 1 distinguishes teachers from the same area. In a similar vein, TT2 represents a teacher from the Toronto area. CT1 refers to a teacher from the Calgary area, and VT3 is for a teacher living in the Vancouver area. Among the 30 teachers, nine were from the Montreal area, nine from the Toronto area, six from the Calgary area, and six from the Vancouver area. To maintain anonymity regarding their genders, we chose to use the neutral pronouns "they/their/them."

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in person, while nine took place virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions. Four focus groups were held in person, with the remainder being one-on-one interviews. The individual interviews averaged 40-50 minutes, while each focus group lasted about 90 minutes on average. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed manually by research team members. The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, with a strict reliance on inductive rather than deductive reasoning (Maxwell, 2005; Butler-Kisber, 2018). Although we used many close-ended questions, we followed up with respondents to understand their reasons if they did not elaborate on their perspectives. In most cases, participants spontaneously continued to share their specific points after initially responding with "yes" or "no." The complete set of interview questions can be found at the end of this document in Appendix 1. Some key interview questions are as follows:

1. What does the word violent extremism mean to you? Does education have a role in preventing violent extremism?

2. What kinds of actions would you consider deviant behavior in students?
3. How would you deal with an individual or a group of individuals found to be acting in deviant ways?
4. Do you discuss controversial issues in the classroom?
5. Do you feel equipped to discuss controversial matters in the classroom?
6. Do you talk about current events or issues related to violent extremism?
7. Have you observed any forms of violent extremism or radicalization at school or among your students? If so, can you please tell us about that experience?
8. Have you ever planned or reflected on teaching students about the harmfulness of radicalization, extremist ideologies, and extremist activities?
9. What are some of the challenges you might face when doing so?

Research findings

1. Teachers almost unanimously believe in the role of education in P/CVE

Our participants generally express that education can play “an important role” in helping young students become resilient against violent extremist ideologies. More specifically, they highlight various aspects of schooling that would directly or indirectly address the issues of radicalization or violent extremism among students. For example, the following narrative illustrates the importance of teachers and schooling in general in helping students become ethical and critical thinkers so that they can cultivate more resilience against violent extremism.

Interviewer: So, does education have a role in preventing extremism?

MT8: Definitely! I mean, teachers are like, after mothers, the first teachers of any child, then fathers, and we (teachers) are coming in second after that. And especially at the age, I mean the students I teach, they are at the age of starting to ask questions. And there is an intellectual reach beyond that of their parents. Yeah, education has a big role in promoting dialogue, in getting students to ask questions and find different sources of information.

CT6 thinks that one of the critical factors that make people vulnerable to extremist narratives is when they do not fit in within society, and schools and teachers can give them the tools to “become part of society and become successful.” Some teachers highlight that the financial well-being resulting from education is vital, too. For example, VT1 says that education is about providing them with financial opportunities to make them feel they belong to the community and they will be giving back to the community. MT7 agrees with VT1, saying that “there has to be a feeling of belonging to a community on an economic level,” which can be realized through education.

However, a few teachers (three) are skeptical about the role of education in this matter. For example, MT2 says,

I am kind of skeptical instead of saying, “Oh yeah, the school can do that.” I see that the school is giving kids so much information today that I am wondering if it is going to be lost, all the knowledge they get in school with all the courses they have taken. There is so much information. I don’t think they will be able to retain it. So, my answer is I am not sure if the school could do that. My hope is that it could.

What MT2 is emphasizing is the banking system of education in some Canadian high schools.

VT1 thinks that “there is not really anything that [they] have in their school to prevent extremism,” and teachers “talk about multiculturalism to blow up in the face” while doing nothing to address this issue. For CT6, Canadian schools put too much emphasis on standardized tests while discouraging critical thinking. Furthermore, this same teacher regards “the design of the system” of education as problematic, so that “what students are getting from education is not working,” or the students even have “very negative experiences within the education system.”

2. *Most teachers believe violent extremism should be addressed but avoid discussing it.*

We find that virtually no teacher opposes the idea of including discussions on violent extremism in the classroom. However, most express a lack of confidence and/or relevant experience in effectively addressing this topic. As a result, they have not prioritized focusing on this matter despite acknowledging its necessity.

MT7 expresses:

I do believe that in our history classes, ethics classes, and all our classes, these topics (around violent extremism) definitely need to be brought up, and that is the first step in discussing them and feeling open enough to explore them.

The above perspective is prevalent among our participants, with a few teachers even suggesting that math and science classes should include such topics. Meanwhile, the following conversation encapsulates the overall landscape of what is happening in Canadian high schools regarding violent extremism.

Interviewer: Do you talk about current events related to violent extremism?

TT5: The answer is no. Very rarely, but if it is a major event, not from this perspective of talking about violent extremists, just about the event generally.

Interviewer: Okay, for example, you did not talk to your students about the London truck attack, the Quebec mosque attack?

TT5: Again, they might come up but not from the perspective of the perpetrators, but more from a perspective of impact and really just to bring attention to a tragedy.

Interviewer: So, how about other current events or controversial topics not related to violent extremism? Do you talk about these?

TT5: Yes. they come up like Black Lives Matter or Indigenous rights and just generally, you know, especially recently related to equity and diversity, so they do come up.

MT5 echoes the above conversation while emphasizing their hesitancy in talking about violent extremism by saying:

In terms of discussions on radicalization, I must admit that I don't necessarily bring it up in my classroom. I haven't had, I would say, discussions about radicalization or extremist thoughts or how that is shaped. But in terms of discrimination, in terms of alienation, we do discuss those things in the classroom.

The above responses reveal that when such topics are broached in schools on rare occasions, they are often covered superficially and akin to news reports. Many teachers concur, admitting that they have hardly ever delved into or even mentioned issues surrounding violent extremism in their classrooms. VT6 echoes similar sentiments, expressing enthusiasm for addressing various controversial topics but highlighting a reluctance to focus on violent extremism. VT5 explains that even though they do not directly address this topic in their class, they are trying to expose their students to diverse opinions.

Some teachers mention discussing radicalization issues only in foreign countries, leaving students unaware of the relevant problems at home. For instance, a conversation with several teachers from Calgary exposes this problem:

CT4: In my class, most of the conversations have focused on distant people or things like ISIS or a set of assumptions that ISIS members are people from their region; they are not from here. The conversations in class are driven by the students. But they have not been discussing, you know, religious extremism. Terrorism, in general, has come up, but usually as a sense of people in distant lands.

CT3: Yeah, there is definitely a very arms-length approach to it. Students' global perspective is still developing, so it is more focused on the world they understand.

Interviewer: Yeah, and it is out there, not here; it's the kind of attitude that a lot of students might have.

CT4: Yeah, I think, you know, when we talked a lot about Syrian refugees coming to Canada, and the fear is that the refugees would bring terrorism here and not the

recognition that terrorism truly does already exist, like the radicalization probably exists, we do not have that conversation.

Interviewer: And they (students) are not aware that some students from Calgary have gone to Syria?

CT4: I don't think so, no.

CT5: No.

It is disappointing and concerning that young students from Calgary are left uninformed about the radicalized youths in their own province, such as the much-known incident of Damian Clairmont, who left for ISIS and was killed in that territory in 2014. The absence of discussions on local issues in the classroom may convey the misconception that violent extremism or terrorism is a foreign phenomenon distant from Canada.

TT2 expresses, "It is discussed sometimes. Every time something happens, major on the news. Like there is a shooting in the States... it does come up. However, it doesn't come up as much in school." A teacher (CT1) from another school in Calgary also says that when ISIS was in the news, they "were talking about it all semester, and violent extremism even became part of the school curriculum." They also invited Damian Clairmont's mother, Christiane Boudreau, to talk about her son's radicalization experiences, which indicates that not all schools in Calgary ignored this issue.

While a few other teachers believe they frequently discuss events related to violent extremism, their focus tends to be on other controversial issues like school bullying, sexism, discrimination, racism, school shootings, abortion, anti-COVID-19 vaccination marches, or even global warming. During our interviews, we did not critique their perspectives on violent extremism.

In our opinion, only a handful of teachers (three) seem to have meaningfully discussed issues relevant to violent extremism in the classroom. For instance, TT8 is one of the very few we have interviewed who deliberately brings topics around violent extremism into their classroom. The following responses show this educator's critical stance and expertise regarding such issues.

Interviewer: Have you ever planned or reflected on teaching students about the harmfulness of radicalization, extremism, fundamentalism, or extremist activities specifically?

TT8: Yes, I have taught about the Rwandan genocide, usually as my starting point, and we have talked about the ten steps of genocide. Moreover, within that process, there is extremism – one of those steps. And we usually tap into some sort of contemporary issues, like the Uyghurs and what is going on over there. We have talked about ISIS as well. And it is certainly something that we talked about in that kind of sense, but so much in the right at home in our backyard. As we talk, I think we should address that as well.

Interviewer: Yes, that's very good, but we have to talk about other issues around us as well, right?

TT8: Right; I do remember talking about the shooting at the mosque in Quebec not too long ago. We did talk about Trumpism and that kind of one of those boys' cults – that kind of extremism. And also the Incel incident in Toronto. We did talk about some stuff close by, but the focus is usually outside our community.

TT8's approach to such an issue indicates some concern related to violence. We identified a couple of other teachers (such as VT2, and MT9) who critically engaged in topics related to violent extremism. Several others (e.g., TT2, MT7, and MT4) express that they touch upon such issues only when relevant events occur, while at other times, they do not. For example, in TT2's case, the whole school and parents would be involved in such topics whenever "something major happens on the news," and "on normal days, everyone is more sheltered from it (violent extremism)." Overall, most teachers openly admit their reluctance to focus on topics around violent extremism.

3. *Teachers cite several reasons for avoiding this topic.*

3.1. Lack of knowledge or expertise

Our findings suggest that while most teachers shy away from discussing topics related to violent extremism, almost all of them express confidence and comfort in discussing other controversial issues. Only two teachers (TT7 and CT5) openly acknowledge that they are not fully equipped to address any controversial topics. Many teachers also seem confident in engaging their students when discussing various social issues, be they controversial or not. Most are enthusiastic and encouraged to help their students become critical thinkers on diverse current events and pressing issues (apart from violent extremism). Nevertheless, when it comes to violent extremism, virtually all of them reveal hesitancy in bringing such topics into their classrooms. The following conversation with teacher TT5 clearly shows this reality.

Interviewer: Do you feel equipped to discuss controversial matters in your classroom?

TT5: Yeah, the answer is yes. I actually quite embrace those sorts of opportunities. Personally, I care a lot about a lot of things about the world. I would not say I'm an expert in almost any current event or controversial matter, but I know something, and I know I will have some principles that I can apply against whatever it might be. However, I don't feel like I am equipped to talk and educate about violent extremism.

TT5's lack of confidence in discussing violent extremism is echoed by many other teachers, to whom insufficient knowledge is the key reason behind their unwillingness. TT6 explains this situation more vividly as follows:

I feel like there are so many teachers who generally have their own views. If I am being generous, they may feel not well equipped to address it (violent extremism). If I'm being perhaps more realistic, which is perhaps less generous, sometimes it's difficult for them because of what they understand. They feel that it may be as it is, as it is portrayed in the media...

TT6's responses shed light on two aspects of teacher incapacity to address the topic of violent extremism. On the one hand, the teachers do not have enough knowledge or information in this area, so they do not feel confident discussing this issue. On the other hand, they may have developed problematic or biased views or perceptions on this topic due to the influence of the media, which further diminishes their qualification to teach it. Many other teachers echo such perspectives, acknowledging their own limitations and lack of capacity to effectively address this topic. Only a handful of them (four) express that they are "somewhat equipped" to address violent extremism in a meaningful way (e.g., TT8, TT9, VT1, and MT8). While MT2 also feels that they can do so, they seem to be conflating violent extremism with other controversial issues, such as abortion as being a violent act or not.

3.2. Limitations related to curriculum and school support

Some teachers note that there is limited space to incorporate topics like violent extremism into the curriculum, as they must adhere to strict requirements. Additionally, math and science teachers appear to have fewer opportunities to broach such subjects compared to their counterparts in other disciplines. For instance, the math teacher TT1 indicates that discussing violent extremism "has not even crossed [their] mind," and they "will probably never talk about such issues in the classroom." In TT1's view, math classes do not allow discussions around social issues or world views, so there is almost no space for these topics. Meanwhile, as TT4 highlights, teachers "are just focused on school and curriculum, which do not address such matters at all."

Several other teachers also point out the nature of the school curriculum that is not compatible with discussing such topics. For example, Calgary teacher CT6 says:

The curriculum here is quite narrow in its scope and we have this sort of external provincial-wide exam. So especially at the grade 12 level, which is mostly where I'm teaching, we're very sort of responsive to that exam. I guess you could say we teach that exam to a significant extent because it's worth a very large percentage of students' grades and is used for post-secondary entrance. So, the nature of that curriculum does

not lend itself very well to the conversation about terrorism. We do a political studies systems unit in that course, and that is about the only place that it does come up sometimes, but it never shows up on the diploma exam. So, it's always to me just a very small enrichment thing, but I'm not going to focus on it.

The narrative underscores how the exam-focused culture can hinder efforts to address violent extremism. Specifically, the absence of meaningful integration of violent extremism into school curricula poses challenges in raising awareness of this issue among students. Similarly, TT8 highlights the lack of adequate school support in addressing this issue.

I feel somewhat confident in addressing these (violent extremism) issues. But I think I've worked to get there on a personal level, and it is not something that was provided or supported by the school, but it's my own personal effort to become more confident in taking on topics that can be challenging.

TT8 stands out as one of the few teachers who actively engages their students in topics around violent extremism. However, they are predominantly self-reliant in this endeavor, as their school lacks teacher training and other forms of support in this area. Consequently, many teachers hesitate to broach this topic in their teaching journeys.

3.3. Concerns about parental opinions

Several teachers (six) highlight how parental concerns act as a barrier to discussing topics related to violent extremism in the classroom. They want to prioritize maintaining positive relationships with parents and seek to avoid conflicts that may arise from differing viewpoints on sensitive matters like violent extremism, as revealed by the following responses of two teachers.

MT3: Students are very much protected; their parents are there all the time, so I know that teachers at school would be very much concerned to address these topics (violent

extremism) because children report everything that happens at school to their parents, and parents know everything that happens at school.

Interviewer: So, they are scared of the parents?

MT3: Yeah.

Interviewer: And in your school, too?

MT1: Very sheltered. Our parents are very interested in their children's education. It's a very grade-oriented, mark-hungry population.

Indeed, such concerns are understandable, considering the delicate and sensitive nature of this topic. According to VT4, the frequent turnover of school administrators hampers effective communication and support between teachers and administration, especially regarding negative parental opinions. Such concerns appear to be particularly pronounced among teachers in private schools. For instance, as mentioned by teacher TT5, who teaches in “an independent school,” educators often feel compelled to consider parental opinions before broaching any contentious subject matter. When it comes to violent extremism, they “just leave it alone because it's too sensitive.” For teacher MT3, who works in a religious school, the situation appears to be more challenging, as they must navigate the expectations of parents who hold strong religious beliefs. “Everything teachers might talk about will be evaluated by parents according to their religion,” says MT3. As TT8 points out, in such situations, the teachers are “not just working with the students' beliefs, but also the parents' beliefs.” This also suggests that the religious facet of violent extremism can add further complexity to relevant discussions. Besides, the school is funded by parents' financial support; therefore, as TT8 highlights, “it's really important that parents are very calm, and they agree with what's going on in schools.”

3.4. Concerns about certain student groups

Some teachers (five) express their deep hesitancy about discussing topics around violent extremism due to concerns about some student populations. For instance, teacher VT3

believes that discussing violent extremism could alienate Muslim students, who are a minority. Therefore, teachers should exercise caution when addressing this topic. VT3 says:

Well, talking about Muslim extremism in a school where there are not many Muslim students at the school so as someone who is a non-Muslim in my social studies class, I think you would have to approach that subject of Muslim extremism with care because you don't want a few Muslim students to be feeling alienated, right?

While it is commendable that this teacher cares so much about their Muslim students, the term “Muslim extremism” can be a form of alienating Muslim students because extremism is not confined to Muslims. Teachers should not focus or single out any form of religious groups when discussing violent extremism in order not to ostracize any groups of students. The above teacher’s overemphasis on “Muslim extremism” can lead to the marginalization of Muslim students, although the intention of the teacher may be to simply discuss extremism and violence.

MT3 believes their students are “too young to understand such complex issues,” making it challenging to contextualize the topic in a way that resonates with them. This concern appears valid. However, we encountered some troubling perspectives among a few teachers. For instance, MT1 seemed to suggest that white students do not need to be educated about these sensitive topics:

I think my school is not a multicultural school. So, I think because the students are amongst themselves and that’s a very Anglo-Saxon community that... there is no diversity, so a lot of these topics would probably be of more interest if it wasn’t such a homogenous population.

The implication of the statement above is that radicalization is perceived as solely affecting ethnic/racial minority students, while white students are considered immune to it. Consequently, MT1 suggests that their predominantly white school does not need to address issues related to violent extremism. Such a misconception undermines the importance of

addressing violent extremism across all demographics within Canadian schools. CT2 highlights another misconception that is preventing discussions on violent extremism in Canadian schools.

We don't do anything officially with CVE because we don't have a problem of radicalization at all. So, there is no problem. Because if you do something, well then, the implication is you have a problem. So, officially, like from a sort of board level, there is no problem, so there is no reason for us to do anything.

The above misconception indicates a deeply flawed perspective that P/CVE is a reactive approach only as is assumed in conventional counter-terrorism measures; prevention is not a matter of citizenship education or the responsibility of schools. While concerns about the school's reputation may arise from discussions of violent extremism, they should not deter schools from including such topics in their curriculum.

CT6 even fears that discussing those topics might attract some students to radicalization and violent extremism. The teacher highlights the potential counterproductivity of speaking about this issue in the classroom:

I think it's more of a news item because, at the same time, I think different teachers have different perspectives. I know teachers who will talk about this... however, there are other teachers who prefer not to talk about it. You are talking about the negatives, you know, other people may become interested in it.

4. Some teachers (six) report signs of radicalization among students.

While we do not advocate for teachers actively monitoring students for signs of radicalization, we were interested in whether they were attentive to their students regarding this possibility. Our findings suggest that many are. Multiple teachers (eight) mention the presence of deviant behaviors among their students, and some (six) confirm that they have

observed specific signs of radicalization or extremist behavior in their students. For instance, teacher MT8 believes that the signs they have observed are clear.

Yeah, a few years ago, there was this group of boys who really attached themselves to ultra-right-wing culture. It was part of the Trumpism culture as well. I have also had a student who was part of a religious group that was in a different school up north, but they were externally very obsessively moralistic and a little bit isolating. But it's also kind of private, so it's hard to gauge exactly what was going on there.

What MT8 emphasizes can be seen as the initial stages of radicalization, which could lead to more destructive outcomes (Moghaddam, 2005). However, such behavior would escape most teachers' notice, as these students may not exhibit any violent behavior. CT6 also notes similar but less pronounced degrees of extremist mindset among their students. Such a mindset is "very little and very, very subtle. It only comes out of conversations," says CT6. Two other teachers mention the existence of violent behaviors among students while rejecting these actions as signs of extremism and radicalization. For instance, TT3 says that they had an "extremely violent" student who would attack other students during class, and he turned out to be "coming from a family where his father was highly abusive towards his mother like he was behaving so in front of their kids and to the point where she fled." MT6 says having "a student in the past who was very fascinated by guns," which is alarming. However, these students were not becoming extremists or radicals, according to TT3 and MT6.

A couple of teachers have reported encountering students who exhibit signs of religious extremism, specifically. For instance, TT2 recounts instances of conflict between Sikh and Muslim students "about their beliefs and just like not liking each other, without even knowing each other, just because they are wearing a turban, or they are not." Similarly, CT2, a teacher from Calgary, notes frequent encounters with "such students from both the Muslim and Sikh communities." CT2 also specifically mentions the existence of "sort of Wahabi ideas or extremist interpretation of Islamic texts" among their Muslim students. However, as this teacher highlights, such views can emerge during discussions on "edgy things," and CT2 often chooses such topics to help their Muslim students become more critical thinkers.

In a similar vein, two teachers from the Vancouver area express their worries about some Muslim students. According to VT1, “a Muslim student is a loner and confused about his religion” and wants to force his religious views onto others. “I was actually a little bit concerned; you know, he could be one of those kids that, but if he was in Syria right now, it wouldn’t have surprised me,” the teacher says. VT1’s colleague, VT2, concurs, noting that the behavior of the student is mirrored by his sibling attending the same school. “We could also see his (the sibling’s) uneasiness with certain things. And as he gets older, it’s going to be more and more a struggle for him,” says VT2.

The teachers discussed above may demonstrate a heightened sensitivity and unconscious bias toward religious minority students, specifically those of the Muslim faith, reflecting prevalent discourses around Islam and radicalization (Kundani, 2016; Mahmut, 2018, 2023; Nagra & Maurutto, 2022). Meanwhile, it is crucial to note the problematic nature of emphasizing the Muslim background of students when discussing signs of extremism or radicalization. This emphasis on Islam is also underscored by Silva’s (2017) analysis of 607 New York Times articles from 1969 to 2014, exposing a significant shift in radicalization discourses “to overwhelmingly focus on Islam” (p. 138).

5. Teachers use some common approaches to address student deviant behavior.

We believed that inquiring about teachers’ comprehension and responses to deviant behaviors, including violent extremism, would provide valuable insights for navigating pertinent discussions. Teachers unanimously emphasize that they take such situations seriously and make concerted efforts to address them effectively. The most prevalent response entails involving school authorities, as stated by VT5, who notes, “Administrators get involved; counselors get involved.” MT1 offers their perspective on addressing students involved in drug-related issues, for example:

You can’t accuse [students], so basically, you can call the administrator in the classroom and mention it to them at the doorway, and they take the student upstairs and deal with it their way, but I can never, as a young teacher, just say, “You know,

Bobby, you're on drugs. You need to get up and go." You can't do that. So that's how I would have proceeded.

It seems evident that here, there exists an implicit code of conduct guiding teachers in responding to deviant behaviors among students. Many of these educators hold the belief that addressing such issues is not solely their responsibility, particularly when it comes to deviant behaviors. Instead, they prioritize respecting students' privacy in these circumstances. But TT8 would not talk immediately to the administration "as that's not their job at that point." TT8 would only reach out to the school Principal when the situation is serious enough. The teacher would also reach out to other teachers to find out if they noticed the same thing. Depending on their connection with the students, TT8 would as well "gently talk to the students about it and listen."

However, MT9 says they would directly confront the problem:

Sometimes, we end up with situations of verbal abuse where someone is being put down, and I will step right in and be like we can't tolerate anything that's homophobic, racist or sexist in the space. It's just not appropriate; it's 2021, and they know it.

By contrast, MT2 accounts that they would prefer playing the role of "a good cop ... and try to be a bit of an advocate for them ..." In addition to involving school authorities, TT7 emphasizes the importance of reaching out to communities and parents. Meanwhile, TT8 delves deeper, highlighting the correlation between home environment and student behavior. Interestingly, this teacher notes that the shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic served as a reminder of this connection for many educators.

And, we are teaching online, so we are in their (students') homes, so we can hear those kids who are unruly in class, and we are here in their environment at home, and their parents are just screaming at them and swearing the entire day. Oh, and now we're starting to understand what's going on there. When I'm approaching students about

deviant behavior or any kind of behavior outside the realm of acceptable behaviors in a school setting, it is always with this understanding that there is a reason why this is occurring, not just kind of jump to the conclusion, but to try to dig into that.

The statement above emphasizes the crucial role of understanding the family environment in addressing student behaviors, a factor that is frequently overlooked by teachers. It underscores the multifaceted nature of student development, recognizing that factors beyond formal schooling, such as family dynamics, can profoundly impact P/CVE efforts.

6. A few teachers (three) highlight Islamophobia among colleagues.

This last finding is of equal significance because Islamophobia can be seen as a by-product of right-wing political ideologies and right-wing extremism (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018). While the existence of Islamophobia among the Canadian public is not surprising, it is disturbing for us to learn about its presence among Canadian teachers, who are expected to serve as exemplary role models for youth. As highlighted earlier in this article, a Quebec English language school board suggested recruiting participants from French language schools, citing the majority of immigrant attendance in these institutions due to the province's language policy. This implies a perception that immigrants, many of whom are Muslims, are more prone to radicalization, mirroring Silva's (2017) findings mentioned earlier. Echoing this systemic bias, teacher CT6 says:

We have had really bad experiences with certain teachers who are just Islamophobic. And, you know, we have them in this school. And in my department. The teachers talk about something that they literally don't understand; what they're projecting is a misunderstanding of a population of like 1.8 billion people who are very, very diverse. And they're just completely ignorant of it. But then the kids don't really feel comfortable enough to challenge that perspective. And they don't have the tools necessary to do that.

The narrative above has two key dimensions. Firstly, there exists a situation where certain teachers harbor biases against Muslims as a collective, often influenced by media representations or other sources. Secondly, educational institutions lack the mechanisms to effectively guide or equip these teachers with the necessary skills to engage with topics related to Islam or similar subjects. Consequently, in alignment with CT6's observations, a subset of educators maintains unconscious prejudices against certain religious communities. Notably, these biases manifest in a heightened sensitivity towards Islamist extremism compared to other forms of extremism, as discussed earlier.

CT2 articulates:

So, usually, I mean, when it's a Muslim student (who is seen as an extremist), the teachers will basically lose their minds over it, right? Both (the teachers and the student) kind of freak right out. When it's a Sikh student who is kind of articulating probably equally his extreme views of Khalistan,⁵ for example, they are usually totally oblivious to it because they don't recognize what is going on...They (some teachers) have become much more sensitive to Islamist extremism compared to other forms of extremism.

Teacher MT9, self-identified as Muslim, contends that racial minority educators may encounter racist or anti-immigrant attitudes within their professional environments. This assertion draws upon their own lived experiences as evidence.

I think I have experienced more overt racism from colleagues at a school where I taught, where there were comments about "rip the towel off your head" and stuff like this on the Internet, like punching the teacher in the face. And that was revealed and dealt with sort of at the board level, but it's just always so shocking when they find that on the Internet server, like on the email server, those sorts of hate messages have been sent.

⁵ Sikh terrorists demanding the creation of Khalistan were responsible for the worst terrorist attack in Canadian history. On June 23, 1985, they bombed an Air India flight en route from Toronto to London, killing 329 people.

During the interview, MT9 passionately expressed their concerns, emphasizing the importance of integrating their experiences into our paper. The challenge of dealing with hate and prejudices from fellow educators raises critical questions, highlighting potential systemic issues within educational environments and broader society. Comparatively, facing such biases from random strangers on the street may present different dynamics.

Discussion

Applying preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies to formal educational settings is itself a controversial matter, as such strategies may not be seen as ethical in school contexts by many people. For example, the UK's Prevent Strategy, although very well-intended and extremely comprehensive, has faced severe criticism since its launch because it is believed to prioritize monitoring over other initiatives (Anderson, 2020; Sardoč et al., 2022). Many other European countries have started to implement similar approaches to tackling their domestic radicalization issues since the early 2010s. Yet, they all tend to expect or require educators to function "as informants for security agencies," which could challenge the principles of human rights (Ragazzi, 2017, p. 7). Many critics argue that this may create the risk that teachers lose the trust of their students, hindering students' critical thinking skills (Ragazzi, 2017; Sardoč et al., 2022). Based on an empirical study of Muslim university students in the UK, Abbas and colleagues (2021) suggest that the Prevent strategy has adversely impacted teacher-student relationships and student mental health while contributing to Islamophobia in British society. Some even find it may have been counterproductive; it may have promoted rather than prevented violent extremism (Walker, 2019), as one of our research participants suggested in this study.

While we do not advocate similar educational strategies that prioritize monitoring, we call for more holistic curriculum content and inclusive teaching approaches that can enhance student agency against extremist ideologies. We concur with Sajjad (2022), who points out the universal issue among mainstream policy discourses that have been using education as a "problem-solving" mechanism rather than cultivating "critical consciousness" among students. Such a mechanism overlooks "the broader structural violence that feeds extremist

ideologies” while seeing education as “a means to control thinking rather than develop it” (p. 59). The inclination towards a “problem-solving” method, as exemplified by participant CT6, is often entrenched within exam culture, posing a challenge to CVE initiatives. Instead, fostering critical thinking abilities should take precedence, equipping young students with the resilience needed to counter violent extremist ideologies.

Another critical issue, as mentioned earlier, is the severe lack of data from teachers on their understanding of and approach to topics related to violent extremism. Among the very few scholars addressing this gap, Vallinkoski, Koirikivi, and Malkki (2022) analyzed data from a large-scale survey of 1,149 participants, including teachers from basic, general upper secondary, and vocational education in Finland. Their study examined the themes of discussions related to violent extremism in Finnish classrooms and the factors prompting such discussions. A significant finding of this research is that Finnish teachers regularly encounter student-initiated questions and discussions about violent extremism, indicating that addressing this issue is an integral part of educational work.

Analyzing the same data, Vallinkoski and Benjamin (2023) reveal that many Finnish educators face challenging situations, some involving signs of extremism, which resonates with our research findings. These educators often struggle to differentiate violent extremism from other motives for hostile or violent behavior, especially among minority groups. Using a similar questionnaire adapted from Vallinkoski and colleagues’ research (2022), Maiberg and Kilp (2022) surveyed 55 Estonian teachers, primarily at the secondary level. They found that while these teachers are enthusiastic about preventing violent extremism through education, they struggle with the concept’s ambiguity, partly due to the lack of a nationwide extremism prevention program, echoing our findings. Consequently, teachers feel uncertain about their roles in addressing extremism.

Breidlid's (2021) study, based on 2019 fieldwork including 50 classroom observations and 30 interviews with teachers, principals, and students at three high schools in Kenya, demonstrates that educators employ an "avoidance strategy" to maintain harmony and social cohesion in their classrooms (p. 71). This, again, aligns closely with our findings.

Sjøen and Mattsson (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen Norwegian secondary school educators (teachers and principals), finding that while educators rarely

encounter youth extremism (unlike our findings), they still feel responsible for its prevention. Teacher opinions vary on the best methods, with most preferring therapeutic prevention to rehabilitate vulnerable youth, reflecting the dominant global discourse on P/CVE efforts. This study raises ethical concerns about balancing national security with student autonomy.

In one of our previous studies (Mahmut et al. 2019), we discussed how Canadian secondary school teachers could effectively approach this topic in their classrooms based on our findings drawing from the data collected in 2016-2018 in the Calgary metropolitan area. In that study, our recommendations mostly revolved around the importance of ethics of care and compassion towards cultivating a sense of belonging in students as well as in reducing student vulnerability to radicalization toward violent extremism with the development of democratic values and critical thinking. Over the next few years, we obtained more data and perspectives on the relevant topic, which has allowed us to better understand how Canadian teachers approach such issues in their classrooms. Therefore, in this current research, we believe we can offer broader and more detailed recommendations for Canadian teachers and policymakers.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the multiple limitations present within this small-scale inquiry. Firstly, the generalizability of our findings is inherently confined to the specific contexts of four metropolitan areas in Canada. Additionally, the modest sample size of 30 participants may constrain the breadth of perspectives represented, limiting the transferability of our conclusions to broader teacher populations. Furthermore, given the qualitative nature of our study, we must contend with various biases, including selection bias, social desirability bias, and researcher bias, which may have negatively influenced our participant selection, interview dynamics, and data interpretation, thereby potentially compromising the trustworthiness of our findings. Lastly, the interpretive nature of qualitative research underscores the potential issue of subjectivity and researcher reflexivity in data analysis and interpretation. To address and mitigate these significant limitations, future research could employ mixed methods, incorporating large-scale surveys alongside a greater number of interviews and focus group discussions. Expanding the geographic scope to include more locations across Canada would also enhance the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the findings. This approach would increase the objectivity of the research by providing a

more diverse and representative sample, thus offering a more robust understanding of the issues at hand.

Recommendations

1. Instructional strategies should include the dialogical method, Socratic Questioning, Roleplaying, and Cooperative Learning so that students can have more opportunities to share their thoughts on sensitive issues like violent extremism with the class while cultivating critical thinking skills regarding such matters.
2. Teachers must strive to better understand the concepts of diversity and culture not merely as distinct songs, games, and attire but as a rich tapestry of behaviors, values, and beliefs of a group based on ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender, and religion. This deeper understanding can be achieved through comprehensive knowledge of the historical and political contexts of Canada, enabling educators to share this enlightening knowledge with students and foster a more nuanced appreciation of diversity. Ultimately, this can help reduce youth vulnerability to violent extremist ideologies.
3. Closely related to the above, it is imperative for educators (administrators and teachers) to engage in a process of self-reflection, examining their own biases towards students in terms of religion, politics, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. This introspection is a crucial step toward recognizing students' different educational needs based on their situation and positionality, and it underscores the commitment to student empowerment.
4. Teachers must respect the dignity of each student, especially those from disadvantaged groups, so as not to marginalize them, which may push them towards extremism. They must have compassion and care for their students to provide them with inclusive and safe spaces, as marginalization or loss of belonging is a key push factor toward radicalization (Ghosh et al., 2017; Mahmut et al., 2019). Following Noddings' (1988) philosophy, we emphasize that an ethic of caring should be "a moral orientation in teaching" (p. 218), which would help students become more resilient to violent ideologies and unhealthy moral values. Conversely, the lack of a nurturing and

empathetic atmosphere can make students feel marginalized and alienated, heightening their vulnerability to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2002). Preventing student moral disengagement requires more than cultivating open-mindedness and critical thinking skills; it also involves actively ensuring every student feels included and validated as a valued member of the school and broader society. Through this holistic approach, teachers can help mitigate the risk factors associated with moral disengagement and thereby reduce the likelihood of radicalization, contributing to a more resilient and cohesive society.

5. Teachers should be encouraged and supported in approaching the topics around violent extremism. School boards and policymakers should explicitly highlight the importance and urgency of discussing this issue when teaching. Teachers should be offered more support and training related to violent extremism. This will not only enhance the skills and confidence of teachers in dealing with such topics but can also help teachers correct or unlearn their conscious and unconscious biases around this topic.
6. Teachers should be better protected by their schools regarding negative parental opinions on discussions of violent extremism in schools. School boards or administrative bodies should inform parents or guardians of their stance and teaching philosophies in relation to such topics through an open dialogue in various fashions. Parents and guardians should also be encouraged to voice their concerns about this issue to the school authorities in a respectful way.
7. Closely related to the above point, educating students about violent extremism should not be seen as the responsibility of schools only. Education taking place at home, in peer groups, and on the internet/social media can have an equal impact on student learning. If teachers fail to respond effectively to their students' queries about sensitive issues, these youth will automatically turn to other avenues to find answers to their questions, especially the internet, which contains plenty of disinformation disseminated by extremist groups (Conway, 2017; Edwards & Gribbon, 2023; Hassan, et al., 2018; van San et al., 2013). Therefore, teachers, as well as parents and

guardians, should pay closer attention to their children's afterschool learning experiences regarding the topics around violent extremism.

Conclusion

In sum, our findings show that a vast majority of teachers are eager and confident to discuss controversial matters, excluding violent extremism. Most of them highly regard the role of education in preventing violent extremism and believe that the relevant topics should be included in classroom discussions. However, they hesitate to approach such topics, pointing out various reasons for their lack of engagement in these matters. They unanimously emphasize their insufficient knowledge and teacher support as the main factors causing their hesitancy. Some teachers attribute their reluctance to their desire to avoid excluding or marginalizing certain groups of students, especially Muslims, while a few others suggest that white students are inherently immune to radicalization. Some also reveal unconscious biases related to radicalization among religious minority students, particularly Muslims, which demonstrates the widespread societal discourses that often associate radicalization primarily with Islam. In addition to that, some teachers voice their concerns about parents, who may have negative opinions or responses on this matter. Additionally, some contend that radicalization is not an issue within their schools; therefore, there is no need to address it, mirroring the prevalent reactive approach to CVE.

Most teachers believe that they have not witnessed any signs of radicalization among their students, while some of them claim that they have had such students illustrating concrete examples. Indeed, there appears to be a heightened sensitivity towards minority students, especially Muslims, regarding this matter, reflecting the prevailing discourses around this issue (Kundani, 2016; Mahmut, 2018, 2023; Nagra & Maurutto, 2022; Silva, 2017). A matter of great concern is that some teachers underscore the presence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim biases within their professional circles. This issue is of paramount concern, as educators serve as role models for their students and should not harbor such discriminatory mindsets. Numerous studies corroborate the detrimental effects of anti-Muslim sentiments, which can lead to the alienation of Muslim communities. This, in turn, heightens the susceptibility of individuals to radicalization, as extremist groups often prey on those who feel

marginalized or disenfranchised. Thus, addressing and mitigating Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudices among educators is imperative to fostering inclusive and safe learning environments (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015; Mitts, 2019).

While Canada's most recent National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence (Government of Canada, 2018) refers to teachers in the context of preventing violent extremism, it falls short of considering the role of education as a means to prevent or counter violent extremism. We emphasize the critical importance of providing adequate training and support to teachers regarding the topic of violent extremism. It is essential that they are equipped to effectively address this issue within the school environment. Since Canada does not have a centralized Ministry of Education at the Federal level, we suggest that this support is coordinated directly by the local education ministry of each Canadian province. Meanwhile, there is an urgent need to enhance collaboration between schools and parents to foster better understanding and consensus on this issue. Equally important is the need for schools to further prioritize the application of ethics of care in school culture and in their educational approaches, ensuring that no student feels marginalized or excluded.

For future research, we suggest conducting a Canada-wide survey and more in-depth interviews of secondary school teachers. Similar studies should also be carried out to examine university professors' experiences in relation to this pressing issue. Meanwhile, this research could be replicated in various other countries to generate more comprehensive as well as contextualized knowledge about violent extremism.

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Appendix

Key interview questions

Understanding of violent extremism and deviant behavior

1. What does the word violent extremism mean to you?
2. Does education have a role in preventing violent extremism?
3. What kinds of actions would you consider deviant behavior in students?
4. Have you had students who may have exhibited any kind of deviant behavior?

Classroom/school discussions

5. Do you have school assemblies in which you talk about values and moral behavior?
How often do you meet?
6. Do you feel equipped to discuss controversial matters in the classroom?
7. Do you discuss controversial issues in the classroom? If so, in which classes?
8. Do you talk about current events related to violent extremism?

The experiences they may have had

9. Have you observed any forms of violent extremism or radicalization at school or among your students? If so, can you please tell us about that experience?

Their own teaching philosophy, experience, and comfort level

10. Do you see a role that education can play in minimizing anti-social behavior? (i.e. drugs, isolation, etc.)
11. How would you deal with an individual or a group of individuals found to be acting in deviant ways?
12. Have you ever planned or reflected on teaching students about the harmfulness of radicalization, extreme fundamentalism, and extremist activities?
13. If so, what changes do you see in students as a result of their teaching and discussions about these issues?
14. If not, what are some of the challenges you might face when doing so?
15. What else do you want to share with us in relation to this matter?

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