

## Echoes of Terror(ism): The Mutability and Contradictions of Countering Violent Extremism in Québec

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### ABSTRACT

Our paper examines the latest frontier of the “War on Terror,” countering violent extremism (CVE), non-coercive approaches that aim to prevent “radicalization” that may lead to “violent extremism” or terrorism. We look at the recent implementation of CVE in Québec’s education sector. Based on an analysis of key policy documents and interviews with CVE practitioners, we find that: (1) teachers are responsabilized to safeguard society from the risk of terrorism through being expected to “know the signs” of radicalization and to build “resilience,” (2) students are responsabilized as agents who can influence their peers against violent extremist messaging and toward “prosocial” behaviour, and (3) elements of school curriculum are responsabilized, especially social studies education, to provide students with “critical thinking” skills thought to be lacking among those at risk of radicalization. We highlight the inherent contradictions in CVE, which, in Québec, claims to foster pluralism and inclusivity to combat Islamophobia, but as a modality of the “War on Terror” also targets and stigmatizes Muslim communities. Critical discussion of CVE’s social implications are needed to initiate critical dialogue in Canada over the impact of CVE in social services provision and the risk of securitizing the education sector in Québec.

### KEYWORDS

Radicalization; Violent extremism; Education; Risk; Resilience; Québec

## Introduction

The post-9/11 “War on Terror” is associated with militaristic campaigns that have led to death and displacement in Muslim countries (Crawford & Lutz, 2019) as well as coercive anti-terrorism laws leading to the detention and torture of Muslims in western countries (Ismail et al., 2014; Razack, 2008). Our paper focuses on the latest frontier of the “War on Terror”—countering violent extremism (CVE), a field of policies and practices aimed at preventing individuals from “radicalization” that may lead to engaging in “violent extremism” or terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Though CVE is designed under the rubric of national security, it stands in contrast to “hard” counter-terrorism practices, relying instead on “soft,” non-coercive approaches enlisting the support and participation of social, education, and cultural institutions (Ragazzi, 2017). Operating in the “pre-criminal” space, CVE purportedly addresses the root causes of terrorism, aiming to avoid the “risk” of future incidents of terrorism (Heath-Kelly, 2017; Martin, 2014; Mythen, 2020). An important component of CVE is detecting signs of “radicalization” or “violent extremism” early in order to intervene pre-emptively with “vulnerable” individuals and communities to make them “resilient” to violent extremism (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Public Safety Canada, 2018). As part of CVE, national security agencies rely on law enforcement, families, schools, social services agencies, and other “frontline” institutions to detect and report on signs of radicalization. CVE programs include engagement and outreach with specific communities, education and training on “radicalization,” public relations and messaging, making non-policing agencies surveillance partners, and targeted psychosocial interventions for individuals (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018; Public Safety Canada, 2018). CVE activity also encompasses programs to “de-radicalize” individuals who are considered to have been radicalized (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

CVE is a relatively new innovation in the practice of counter-terrorism that is institutionalized in varying degrees across different countries. Arguably, the most prominent and influential CVE initiative is the U.K.’s *Prevent* strategy, which was activated in 2006 in response to incidents of “homegrown terrorism” in the U.K. and Europe (Kundnani, 2012). Indeed, CVE stems from states wanting to prevent “Islamist” terrorism within their respective borders by perpetrators who were born and raised in the same country. CVE activity intensified across countries in North America and Europe in 2015, in response to the so-called “foreign fighters” phenomenon, a label used in reference to “radicalized” Muslim youth travelling to Syria and Iraq to participate in conflicts there and returning back (Silva & Deflem, 2020; U.N. General Assembly, 2015). With the previous Harper Conservative government favouring “hard” counter-terrorism approaches over a “soft” CVE approach, Canada’s federal government was slow to develop a national CVE strategy.<sup>2</sup> So, provinces and municipalities proceeded to develop their own CVE responses. The province of Québec was a forerunner in developing a CVE plan, which was a response to the high-profile attacks in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa in 2014, and a wave of CEGEP<sup>3</sup> college students either having traveled or wanting to travel to join conflicts in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and 2015 (CPRLV, 2016a; Solyom, 2016). Québec’s plan called for closer coordination, monitoring, and capacity building to tackle radicalization to violence across eight ministries including the *Ministre de l’Immigration, de la Diversité et de l’Inclusion*, the *Ministre de la Santé et des Services sociaux*, and the *Ministre de l’Éducation, de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche* (Québec,

<sup>1</sup> Policy documents use different terminology to refer to CVE, e.g., “counter-radicalization” (CR), “countering radicalization to violence” (CRV), and “preventing violent extremism/radicalization” (PVE/PVR). While there may be nuanced differences across national jurisdictions, essentially these refer to non-coercive efforts to prevent future occurrences of terrorism and violent extremism.

<sup>2</sup> The change to a Trudeau Liberal government at the federal level in 2015, brought with it a political will for CVE (Kubicek & King, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The CEGEP system (*Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel*) refers to publicly funded, post-secondary, pre-university institutions unique to the Québec education system. In our article, where we refer to colleges, we are describing those that are part of CEGEP.

2015). The plan sought to both tackle “Islamist extremism” as well as counter negative stereotyping of Islam in Québec. The Ministry of Education adopted the plan by making radicalization trainings available to school administrators and teachers, and by encouraging teachers to promote attitudes and skills thought to oppose radicalization to violence, such as inclusivity and critical thinking (Ministère de l’Éducation et Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, n.d.). Québec’s CVE plan also supported the establishment of the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence in Montréal (CPRLV), an independent CVE focused nonprofit organization co-funded by the City of Montréal. Today, there is an active network of CVE organizations across Québec. Focusing on Québec’s CVE response, our research examines what is at stake for professionals in the education sector as CVE strategies become intertwined with curriculum and day-to-day teaching.

The Canadian federal government has since gone on to develop a National CVE Strategy (Public Safety Canada, 2018). Today, two decades after 9/11, there are several entities across Canada dedicated to countering radicalization and violent extremism that work at the interstices of government, civil society, and communities (O’Halloran, 2020). In Québec and elsewhere, these efforts retain the problematic characteristics of CVE that have been widely discussed in literature. First, because of its origins and aims to tackle “Islamist” radicalization, CVE effectively reinforces the status of Muslims as “suspect communities” who are perennially at the risk of radicalizing to violence (Breen-Smyth, 2014). CVE has resulted in the surveillance, stigmatization, and securitization of Muslim communities (Ahmad, 2020; Kundnani, 2012). Second, CVE is not merely about disrupting violence, but shaping the identity and cultural values of Muslim “Others” who are thought to be incompatible with notions of imagined “Western” values (Lynch, 2013). Finally, the epistemological grounding of CVE is shaky as it relies on the poorly conceptualized notion of “radicalization” (Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019). Terms like “radicalization” and “violent extremism” have vague definitions (Richards, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010). Specifically, it remains unclear whether “radicalization” refers to the process of developing “extreme” beliefs or violent behaviour; moreover, political discourse determines which beliefs are considered “extreme.” In the context of the “War on Terror,” the notion of “radicalization” has been used to refer to Muslims developing “extreme” religious beliefs that are *assumed* to be linked to violence (Kundnani, 2012). Radicalization indicators, that are used to identify ideational and behavioural changes towards violent extremism, are intertwined with racial and religious bias that see risk in cultural and political expressions by Muslims (Monaghan & Molnar, 2016). Our research inquires how CVE reconciles the seemingly competing logics of viewing Muslims as risky but treating them as vulnerable populations who have to be secured from violent extremism.

We rely on theoretical notions of risk and resilience to critically examine the growth and traction of CVE. In attempting to pre-emptively act upon uncertain futures of violent extremism, CVE engages in the process of identifying individuals and groups at risk of and vulnerable to “radicalization.” Risk-based assessments, through indicators and discourse, are at the heart of CVE efforts, and have relied on social constructions of race, religion, and identity. Closely related to risk is the notion of resilience, which is a desired outcome of CVE interventions. While community or individual resilience may be a desirable social good on its own, it takes on specific meaning when enmeshed with CVE. In the context of CVE, it is assumed that particular groups and individuals can build resilience by working towards specific skills (e.g., critical thinking) and committing to particular values (e.g., pluralism). When CVE claims to support Muslim youth and communities in building “resilience,” it exposes an underlying assumption known in the field of education as “deficit-thinking.” The “deficit-thinking” model attributes shortcomings to endogenous deficiencies, tying the failures of racialized students to culture, race, biology, or language instead of systemic issues like racism, classism, and the neoliberalization of education (Menchana, 2012; Valencia, 2012). It can be inferred that CVE’s “deficit-thinking” encodes Islamophobia by deeming that Muslim youth and communities need resilience because of their internal deficits. Within the shifting CVE landscape, our research explores how

education is seen through lenses of risk and resilience via CVE implementation in schools. As CVE widens to tackle right-wing extremism, we reflect on how resilience is recalibrated in the political context of Québec.

Data for our research are based on a reading of key CVE policy documents and semi-structured interviews with CVE practitioners in Québec who are involved in delivering radicalization trainings or working closely with educational institutions on CVE matters. Our findings suggest that, as educators are being asked to take radicalization trainings and incorporate CVE in curriculum and practice, both educators and students are being responsabilized to “safeguard” society from radicalization and violent extremism. These movements bear the risk of securitizing the educational sector in Québec. Moreover, CVE appears to retain an inherent contradiction: it is seen as a technology that can foster pluralism and inclusivity to combat Islamophobia, yet it retains aspects of its Islamophobic origins and continues to stigmatize Muslim communities.

The rest of our paper is organized as follows. We begin with a deeper discussion of risk and resilience underpinning CVE. Following that, we present our methodology, after which we dive into our thematic findings and a discussion of those findings. We conclude this paper with some reflection on future directions of CVE in Canada.

### **Risk and Resilience in Countering Violent Extremism**

CVE strategies were developed in response to the uncertainty and insecurity posed by the threat of “homegrown terrorism” (Millett, 2020). The logic of CVE normalizes taking security-informed, society-wide actions in order to mitigate the risk of a *future* incident of violent extremism. CVE is a technique that acts upon “radicalization,” a pathway and process that leads from normalcy to “extremist” thought and violent action. But scholarship and policy documents have noted the concept of radicalization is contested, the pathways of radicalization are complex, and the link between “extremist” thought and violent action is tenuous (Kundnani, 2012; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018; Sedgwick, 2010). Ultimately, this makes the future of an incident of “violent extremism” inherently unknowable; nevertheless, CVE seeks to mitigate that risk by taking action today. Critical terrorism scholars observe CVE to be part of a turn in contemporary security from a reactionary to an anticipatory logic, which focuses toward containing potential “risky” events, with models and knowledges developed to make the governing of “unknowable futures” possible in the present (de Goede & Simon, 2013; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Martin, 2014). Risk here is conceived via Foucault as “a productive technique of governance which makes security actionable” (Heath-Kelly, 2013, p. 395). CVE is seen as an exemplar of this new anticipatory logic in security, aiming to make terrorism knowable and pre-emptively governable, extending the practice of counter-terrorism forward to the level of the “potential future terrorist” (Martin, 2014, p. 62). Through “radicalization,” terrorism is made amenable to problem-solving approaches, opening up a new domain of security-led prevention “at ever-greater temporal remove from the danger it seeks to mediate” (Martin, 2014, p. 62).

In its ambition to manage risk, CVE is both “a means of governing – and of making governable” (Martin, 2014, p. 62). Owing to its origins to tackle “Islamist” extremism, CVE has made Muslim communities the governable subjects who are both a source of risk and vulnerable to risk (Heath-Kelly, 2013). Through the discursive techniques used within CVE, Muslims are considered a risk because of their racial, religious, and cultural distance from imagined notions of dominant “Western” values. On the other hand, they are “vulnerable” subjects who can be readily influenced by “violent extremist messaging” and terrorism recruiters. This dual construction of Muslim communities, at once risky and at-risk, legitimates a wide range of CVE interventions ranging from surveillance and policing, on one hand to community cohesion and social programming, on the other (Martin, 2014).

A stated outcome of CVE efforts is to make communities “resilient” to violent extremism. In surveying CVE efforts across North America and Europe, Stephens and Sieckelink (2020) found that the language of “resilience” has been adopted within CVE because of its “optimistic overtones” that “focuses on strengths rather than deficits” (p. 143). They observed that resilience captures the ability of “bouncing back” to a state

of equilibrium following stress or adversity. In the case of CVE, it refers to a community's or individual's resilience toward "extremist ideologies." However, Stephens and Sieckelinck (2020) noted that the end state of resilience is never actually defined, leaving it to be discursively conceived against a set of unspecific, subjective notions. In this context, CVE, through techniques that include educational practices and approaches, seeks to induce "less threatening ascriptions of identity and values," that are thought to produce the "appropriate"/"moderate" Muslim subject who is resilient to violent extremism (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Martin, 2014; Ragazzi, 2017). The paradigm of resilience also assigns the work to develop certain skills and values upon the communities identified to be vulnerable. Thus, despite the above observation by Stephens and Sieckelinck (2020), resilience in CVE reflects "deficit-thinking," which assumes that internal deficiencies within Muslim communities propel them towards "violent extremism." CVE enlists existing welfare state actors, such as teachers and health and social service professionals, for building resilience against violent extremism. In this manner, CVE responsabilizes the vulnerable individuals and communities themselves as well as the social actors working to make those individuals and communities "resilient." As such, responsabilizing detracts from issues of systemic marginalization and political grievances tied to state practices that are more challenging to address.

Our research contributes to an area that has yet to be fully explored in the critical literature: CVE's increasingly intertwined relationship with education. Critical social policy literature has highlighted concerns over the securitization of education and social policy in the U.K. via CVE's reach into the educational and human services sectors (Durodie, 2016; Ragazzi, 2017). We ask, what is at stake for educators as CVE encroaches into day-to-day practices and curricula? This question gains relevance in Canada as CVE approaches take hold where the teaching of "radicalization awareness" in the classroom (while not legally mandated as in the U.K.) is central to primary prevention, and teachers are thought to bear a responsibility to safeguard society by "knowing the signs" of radicalization among the student populace and being prepared to make referrals for interventions. We assess how the problematic construction of Muslims in the risk and resilience discourse of CVE (discussed above) disproportionately implicates Muslim students in "radicalization" referrals. In social studies education, there is an additional pretext based on the rise of critical thinking and digital literacy skills being seen as a protective factor against all forms of violent extremism. We reflect on these issues, in addition to considering how radicalization research and CVE strategies intersect with existing categories of "vulnerable" and "at-risk" youth in education.

## Methodology

This research study is part of a broader examination of the proliferation of CVE and its social impact that we undertake in our respective doctoral projects. The findings in this study rely on semi-structured interviews with twelve CVE practitioners in Québec. All participants interviewed have experience with training teachers and/or conducting workshops in schools in the cities of Montréal and Québec, as well as in non-urban regions. We used a snowball sampling strategy for identifying interviewees; starting with two initial contacts, we identified new interviewees based on recommendations of previous interviewees. Using this sampling technique, we gained access to practitioners whose job profiles involved CVE functions, even though it was not always apparent (Handcock & Gile, 2011). Outreach to interviewees to request participation in our research was conducted over email. While not exhaustive, our sample provides important insights from a range of CVE practitioners. The category "CVE practitioner" is itself an imprecise signifier, as a plethora of different sectors of society combine elements of this work into existing missions. Our interviews included people employed by CVE-specific organizations, people working in the non-profit sector with partnering organizations in CVE projects, and civil servants where CVE is one of several files undertaken. All interviews were conducted in-person between 2018 and 2020. The interviews tended to last between one to two hours, with open-ended questions that focus on CVE practitioner backgrounds, what prompted them to become involved, and how they reflect on the meaning of their work (see sample questions in Appendix A). The interviews did not focus specifically on education and schools; however, these topics were consistently raised in the dialogue, relating to the emphasis placed on schools and teacher training in Québec's CVE action plan. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed with the digital recording archived after transcription. In

line with ethics guidelines, the identity of interviewees is anonymized; therefore, the interviewees quoted in this study are assigned a pseudonym. Other identifying information, such as the name of CVE project interviewees worked on and place of employment, has also been omitted in order to prevent participant identification.

As mentioned, the interviews examined for this paper are part of a larger study on the field of CVE. The data analyzed was drawn from a subset of codes identified under the code *school*, which included sub-codes pertaining to different dimensions of CVE's association with education, e.g., *school as perceived site of radicalization*; *school as site of radicalization prevention*; *education as prevention tool*, and so on. We further analyzed and coded this dataset for the themes of risk, resilience, values, education strategies, and right-wing application of CVE, as we identified these as pertinent codes for this research study based on our review of the CVE literature. The data was then examined along with an analysis of key policy documents on Québec's CVE measures, and arranged into themes based on principles of qualitative thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an inductive approach for deriving meaning from empirical data. The three key themes our research identifies are described in detail in the following findings section.

Through this research, we aim to move critical discussion on CVE's social implications to the ground level realities of its daily implementation, the types of dilemmas and contradictions that arise in the field, and their effects. Our work addresses a well-identified gap in the radicalization literature concerning the lack of community and frontline perspectives in research (Spalek & Weeks, 2017). Hearing directly from frontline CVE practitioners allows us to assess how the implementation of CVE strategies intertwines with the state provision of educational services. Our work adds to recent critical assessment of CVE in Canada (e.g., Monaghan & Molnar, 2016) by focusing on the case of Québec. In the next section, we begin with a background discussion of CVE in Québec's education system followed by a description of our key findings.

### **Unpacking the Intersection of CVE and Classroom Education: The Québec Case**

In Québec, CVE practices have directly implicated provincial education policies. Québec formulated a provincial CVE plan in response to a wave of students from Collège de Maisonneuve departing in 2014 and 2015 to allegedly participate in conflict in Syria (Solyom, 2016). Concerns of radicalization were also exacerbated after the highly publicized attacks in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and in Ottawa by individuals thought to have been inspired by "Islamist" extremism. The Government of Québec released a three-year inter-governmental action plan, *La radicalisation au Québec: agir, prévenir, détecter et vivre ensemble* [Radicalization in Québec: act, prevent, detect and live together] (Québec, 2015). The plan outlined 59 measures for radicalization prevention across eight ministries, including asking the Ministry of Education to promote a CVE curriculum sensitizing teachers and students to radicalization to violence. As part of the plan, the province provided funding for the City of Montréal-led Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV), which began operating in the summer of 2015. CVE implementation in Québec would see the government partner with research institutes and nonprofit organizations, such as the SHERPA University Institute and Institut du Nouveau Monde, while other organizations specifically devoted to CVE emerged, such as Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) and Project Someone. Some of these entities have grown to become exporters of CVE policy to the rest of Canada and globally. The primary focus of the swiftly evolving Québec model for CVE was on "radical Islam" and the vulnerability of young immigrants to it.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there was a pervading sense of the pitfalls of CVE approaches that stigmatize Muslim communities, as well as an awareness that the negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims in Québec was negatively affecting Muslim immigrants' sense of belonging, which was thought to be contributing to violent radicalization (CPRLV, 2016a; Rousseau et al., 2016). Thus, the competing discourse that treated Muslim immigrants as a source of risk but also at-risk (Heath-Kelly, 2013) would become a hallmark of CVE practice in Québec. Consensus formed around a

<sup>4</sup> The introduction to Québec's action plan calls for rapid and targeted intervention against "un courant radical violent de l'Islam" [a violent radical current of Islam] (Québec, 2015, p. 7).

“social-psychological” approach to prevention that emphasizes group belonging and positive social identity construction as resilience-building factors, along with making interventions against racism, discrimination, and Islamophobic prejudices (Dejean et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2016). The section of Québec’s action plan, “vivre ensemble” [live together] contains measures for fostering social cohesion, inclusiveness, respect for social diversity, as well as for building positive feelings of citizenship and identity association with Québec among ethnic minorities (Québec, 2015). These lofty goals stand in contradiction to the political reality in Québec, where anti-Muslim sentiment is the highest among Canadian provinces and where Muslims were targeted in the deadly mosque shootings of 2017 (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). Québec also recently passed into law Bill-21 that bans religious symbols for public sector employees. In practice, the bill targets Muslim women by denying them the right to wear the hijab in public sector jobs, thus also leading to their marginalization in education contexts (Wells, 2019).

Under Québec’s CVE plan, schools and colleges would be placed at the “frontlines” in the fight against radicalization and violent extremism. The action plan included researching the factors that make Québec students vulnerable to radicalization (measure 2.1.1), and training for teachers on preventing radicalization, promoting critical thinking, and dealing with sensitive subjects in the classroom (measures 2.6, 2.5, 4.1) (Québec 2015). The emphasis on the education system was based on the belief that people between the ages of 15 and 25 were most vulnerable to “radicalization,” and that schools, as places of socialization for young people, provide important protective factors, namely positive classroom environment, student support services, diverse educational perspectives, and sense of belonging and identity building (Dejean et al., 2016). Schools were also seen as places where risk factors for “radicalization” – prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination – become noticeable and can be addressed. A study released with Québec’s CVE plan describes schools containing “zones de fragilité constituant un terreau favorable à la radicalisation” [vulnerable areas that serve as a breeding ground for the radicalization] of Quebecers from immigrant backgrounds and that it is incumbent on educational institutions to identify and develop tools to mitigate these vulnerable areas (Dejean et al., 2016, p. 6). Research reports in Québec have noted that by focusing on education, CVE action can emphasize the prevention side of CVE efforts over detection, which is thought to stigmatize Muslim communities (Dejean et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2016). Nevertheless, detection remains a core aspect of Québec’s CVE plan and teachers are encouraged to “know the signs” of radicalization. Research elsewhere has shown how the process of detecting radicalization is based on implicit anti-Muslim bias (Monaghan & Molnar, 2016; Younis, 2019). By introducing CVE in schools and colleges, Québec has moved toward securitizing the education sector.

## Findings

Below, we present the findings of our research. We outline three themes that emerged from practitioner interviews and document analysis, highlighting what is at stake for educators and education as CVE is adopted in schools and colleges. Specifically, we highlight how 1) teachers are being responsabilized to safeguard society from the risk of terrorism by being expected to “know the signs” of radicalization and build “resilience” through mentoring and pedagogical practices; (2) students are responsabilized as agents to influence their peers against violent extremist messaging and toward “prosocial” behaviour, and; (3) the school curriculum, particularly social studies, is responsabilized as a protective agent against extremism with the onus to provide “critical thinking” skills. In a later discussion section, we explore the broader applicability and social implications of these findings, including the inherent contradictions of a CVE plan, which in Québec, claims to foster pluralism and inclusivity to combat Islamophobia, while also targeting and stigmatizing Muslim communities.

### Teachers are Responsibilized in Reducing the Risk of Terrorism

Our interviewees underscored that teachers are central interpreters and arbiters of CVE education. Teachers can have both a positive and negative impact on prevention, particularly in the latter instance if they bring in “close-minded views” on topics related to violent extremism or rehearse anti-Muslim discourse dominant in Québec society. Best practice calls for school staff to be aware of the impact of their lessons or words, noting that when students feel offended by teaching sequences, such as on religion, they tend to

disengage and seek alternative knowledge (Dejean et al., 2016, p. 31). CVE practitioners involved in teacher trainings highlight these obstacles: “We had debates [over sensitive subjects] with the students but I would say that the most closed-minded people we saw were the teachers,” remarks Erica, a practitioner with experience running CVE modules in Québec high schools and colleges. A similar impression is expressed by Valerie, a CVE practitioner who has conducted teacher orientations in Québec and other provinces: “We have it in mind that we want to train them [the teachers] for the students, but then we see that between teachers it’s a problem.” Teacher trainings thus become spaces “for people to talk about their bigoted views [...] because they don’t have a place to talk about it elsewhere.” Multiple practitioners from different organizations described the myths and stereotypes the teachers held around Islam and spoke of uncomfortable training scenes where teachers made derogatory comments about Muslims in front of colleagues that were of North African or South Asian descent.

Teacher responsabilization under CVE extends to pedagogical practices in the classroom. Here, “a unique opportunity” is thought to be presented for promoting students’ resilience and influencing intergroup dynamics (Dejean et al., 2016, p. 33). Per Québec guidelines, learning activities are recommended that foster critical thinking and provide space for open dialogue on difficult subjects, as well as “intercultural awareness activities” and lessons that create a sense of community by promoting student cooperation (Dejean et al., 2016, p. 32; CPRLV, 2016a, 2016b; Project Someone, 2018). Teachers are encouraged to provide mentorship outside of teaching time by engaging students in conversations on extra-curricular subjects (Dejean et al., 2016; Ministère de l’Éducation et Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, n.d.) In addition, teachers are equipped through training to “know the signs” of radicalization and on how to handle it, should the issue arise. An information toolkit by CPRLV (2016b) considers teachers as playing a key role in prevention strategies “as they know their students and are therefore in a position to note, on a daily basis, any changes in behaviour or adoption of stances that may be indicative of radicalization” (p. 10). Similarly, the education ministry of Québec calls for teachers to be familiar with their school’s intervention strategy and be prepared to “[d]iscuss with other educators the situation of young people who appear to be at risk” of radicalization (Ministère de l’Éducation et Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, n.d.).

Within this lies an apparent tension in the Québec model, which prides itself on *prevention over detection*. In practice, the onus is on teachers to determine to what extent educators should look for “signs” and refer those perceived as at-risk of radicalization to authorities. Marc, a research manager at a Québec-based CVE organization reasons:

Whether you like it or not, people do detection because the radicalization discourse is there. What we say is, “be aware in a very kind of passive way. And when you're going to see something, don't get crazy. Just sit down, take your staff and see if you need to be worried. If you need to be worried, then call us or deal with it through the school.”

Our interviewees conveyed how underprepared teachers and schools can shape CVE practice. Geneviève, who provides CVE related psychosocial intervention, notes the numerous “false-positive” referrals they receive about students that amount to “a misunderstanding of the situation,” noting for example, “we received referrals from schools that thought a young Muslim boy with behavioural problems could be a potential terrorist.” Geneviève muses that these incorrect referrals can do further harm in preventing radicalization, as can attempts by schools and teachers to intervene improperly with students identified to be at risk via punitive measures. Despite the reflexive comments by practitioners, the dynamics of CVE in Québec have cast teachers as agents of state surveillance, especially as they take on functions of detecting “radicalization.” Teachers are asked to pay attention to student vulnerabilities, foster a sense of belonging and provide diverse educational experiences. Yet, societal discourse on the danger of radicalization of Muslims is, expectedly, informing how teachers perceive risk among Muslim students.

### **Students are Responsibilized through “Awareness and Agency”**

CVE practitioners interviewed shared similar beliefs on the importance of youth involvement in CVE. Isabella, an interviewee who runs youth-based projects on CVE in the Montréal area, states that the key to

gaining youth participation in CVE is to “work with youth with knowledge on the ground [...] encourage and aid youth who are already engaged in their communities, and give them agency,” adding that “when you give agency, engage in dialogue, it opens the door.” Both in the Québec plan and in wider CVE policy, there exists the belief that youth can be empowered to safeguard each other. If given the proper tools, they are seen as uniquely positioned to counter “extremist” messaging and influence their peers toward “prosocial” endeavours (Public Safety Canada, 2018, p. 26).

In the Québec context, there is an emphasis on “civic and humanitarian engagement,” with youth-based initiatives prioritized that promote intercultural dialogue, pluralistic identities, and belonging to Québec society (Destiné & Marsolais, 2016). As explained by the Minister of Immigration, Diversity and Inclusion in a radio interview, “We are focusing on anchoring young people in their community, allowing them to get involved in order to see an impact on their school, among other things” (Destiné & Marsolais, 2016). This description suggests that fostering “participative citizens” who mobilize in the face of injustices and take responsibility for forms of intolerance in their environment should be considered a protective factor in fighting radicalization (Hachey, 2018).

This approach to student engagement carries over into interventions by CVE practitioners in Québec classrooms to “raise awareness” regarding the issues related to radicalization. CVE practitioners spoke of the successes they have had in working with youth in classroom settings to promote “attitudes, values, and critical thinking that will serve as protective factors,” as well as to teach students “that being Québécois was like not about your accent or your religion but instead a feeling of belonging.” Despite these optimistic overtures, many said that they often avoided using the terminology around radicalization and violent extremism when conducting workshops in schools because they saw it as unnecessary or as directing attention away from the broader purpose of promoting inclusion and a cohesive society. As explained by Erica:

We determined it was not necessary to talk about radicalization. Not everyone you will speak to in the school will understand that when you say that you mean you have a program just to encourage critical thinking, to talk about vivre ensemble, to talk about racism, to challenge stereotypes, to talk about Québec identity, that's not what they're going to understand.

CVE practitioners seem to be implicitly aware of the tension that the CVE label can be stigmatizing and counter-productive to its stated aims of strengthening social belonging and civil engagement of students. This raises important questions about the broader implications of CVE as it subsumes otherwise beneficial social initiatives under the surveillance and security umbrella of combating violent extremism.

### **The Curriculum is Responsibilized as a Protective Agent**

“With guns, you can kill terrorists. With education you can kill terrorism”

–Malala Yousafzai (re-printed in CVE teacher training modules of a Québec-based organization)

Lastly, and of particular concern to social studies education, is how the school curriculum itself is seen as a safeguard against violent extremism. This is the case as consensus forms across the field of CVE on critical thinking and digital literacy being a primary way to build “resilience.” It is widely thought that the terrorism offenders hold simplistic visions of the world (Dejean et al., 2016; Sageman 2014). The key to prevention is, as one of our interviewees put it, to “encourage them to see colours” and to read beyond propagandist narratives on social media.

Rather than relying on schools to teach this with existing resources, CVE agencies in Québec have been developing their own tools for classroom use. This includes lesson plans available for download by CPRLV, Project Someone, and Recherche et Action sur les Polarisations Sociales (RAPS) on information literacy and “open discussions on social and political issues.” A Project Someone presentation notes how facilitating pluralistic dialogue on controversial subjects and the development of critical thinking skills is positively correlated to commitments to civic engagement, tolerance of different viewpoints, and empathy –

all thought to be protective factors for warding off radicalization (Project Someone, 2018). The need and importance of “open dialogue practices that create opportunity for critical reflection” was highlighted due to the “tense political atmosphere” in Québec (Isabella interview), with many practitioners referring to the divisive consequences of Bill-21, and on the need to unpack the meaning of the bill specifically with students and teachers.

CVE practitioners that have run modules on critical thinking and digital literacy in Québec schools also remark on filling a perceived gap in humanities and social studies education programming. Erica saw her role in giving modules as “providing some curriculum supplement, taking the load off the teacher,” noting that teachers in ethics and religious studies classes were pleased with how it fit their course curriculum. Erica expressed enjoying conducting this type of work but opined that: “in an ideal world we don’t need like outsiders to come and make the students question their world in a critical way,” and went on to suggest that “if schools did what they’re supposed to be doing [...] we wouldn’t need primary prevention activities.” When prompted on this further, Erica explained:

For prevention to really work, the high school curriculum needs to be completely changed. To me that is actually the root of the issue. Critical thinking must be objective number one, but it’s not, and what they are learning [...] it’s more about knowing than thinking. We need to see it as teaching citizens how to find information, how to be critical of information, and knowing the difference between and good source of information and a bad source of information.

These comments reflect a concern within CVE circles that the humanities and social studies, due to budget cuts, are no longer providing students with the critical tools (i.e., protective factors) required to understand the world around them, leaving them “impervious to the plurality of points of view” and extra vulnerable to the dangers of social media and the internet (Dejean et al., 2016; CPRLV, 2016b). Even though such a view acknowledges the structural constraints that have impacted the educational sector, it fails to situate CVE within its broader context. At its core, CVE is an instrument of security governance and state surveillance, seeking to prevent violent extremism through non-security means. Focusing on imagined best-case outcomes of CVE does little to draw attention to state politics and security discourses that shape CVE practice. We argue that the enmeshing of CVE with education priorities in Québec represents a move toward securitization of schools and society.

## Discussion

Our research underlines the ways in which schools in Québec have become a site of operationalizing CVE. In particular, we highlighted how teachers are responsabilized to detect signs of “radicalization.” Practically speaking, this development has heightened the surveillance of Muslim students, as teachers rely on stereotypes about Islam and Muslims to determine who is “at risk” of radicalizing. We showed how schools and educators aim to augment student agency in resisting “radicalization” by instilling particular skills and values. CVE’s framework of “resilience,” inspired by a deficit-thinking view, locates the reasons for “radicalization” in shortcomings among students themselves. Finally, we discussed how the curriculum has been enhanced with modules of “critical thinking” and “digital literacy” to protect students from “radicalization.” This design sidelines CVE’s *raison d’être* as a tool of surveillance and security to manage Muslim “radicalization.” Below, we discuss further implications of our findings.

In Québec, CVE is applied through the act of identifying those *at-risk* of or vulnerable to “radicalization” and “violent extremism” and leveraging education to help build *resilience* among those who are vulnerable. It is evident from our data analysis that CVE boasts lofty ambitions in Québec: it aims to foster a sense of belonging, engender inclusiveness, enable critical thinking, and even combat Islamophobic prejudice. However, CVE in Québec is a specific response to “a violent radical current of Islam” and is a form of security governance operating in the social realm. CVE in Québec has not confronted these contradictory

aspects and, therefore, is both able to claim to combat Islamophobic prejudice by encouraging inclusiveness and engender Islamophobia by targeting interventions to tackle radicalization as a problem in Muslim communities.

The CVE practitioners we interviewed seemed to be aware of these contradictions (at least implicitly): on one hand, they conveyed that CVE can potentially address the gaps of critical thinking and cultural sensitivity in the education system. On the other hand, they did not want to use the CVE label publicly, especially among Muslim students, so it does not “distract” from the broader purpose of building cohesiveness or inclusivity. This reflects an awareness among practitioners that there is a stigma attached to CVE, especially among Muslim communities. It also suggests there is a gap in the celebratory rhetoric surrounding CVE in government documents and its implementation among target communities. For instance, CVE practitioners and organizations emphasize that Québec’s CVE approach favours *prevention* over *detection*, and yet, teachers and schools find themselves in the position to determine who might be “at-risk-to-radicalize” and to make referrals. Thus, the movement of CVE into the education sector is strewn with contradictions. Nevertheless, with political impetus behind the CVE field across Canada, including the newfound enthusiasm toward countering right-wing extremism and white supremacist violence, we suspect that the field will expand and continue to retain its fundamental problematic features. As we mark the two-decade anniversary of the 9/11 and the “War on Terror,” our intervention calls for taking stock of CVE as a new technology of security governance that encodes an insidious form of Islamophobia, making it more difficult to confront.

In the education sector, we have particular concerns as teachers, students, and the curriculum itself are expected to play an active role in advancing the goals of CVE. Teachers are expected to become experts at recognizing signs of “radicalization” and develop a nuanced understanding of concepts within CVE, such as “radicalization” and “extremism,” that have even vexed experts. Teachers are responsabilized to identify students at risk of “radicalization” and foster resilience against “violent extremism,” but as resilience itself is a subjective formation, teachers rely on bias and stereotypes in formulating their actions. As our interviewees noted, the myths and stereotypes teachers held about Islam and Muslims prompted the disproportionate monitoring and referrals of Muslim students. This surveillance and stigmatization of Muslim students under CVE invokes the spectre of the “school-to-prison pipeline,” through which policing and disciplining practices in schools criminalize racialized students (Skiba et al., 2014).

For Muslim students, CVE in education introduces another dimension to the systemic disadvantage already experienced by racialized students in Canada’s schools (Shah, 2019). In the Québec plan, students are expected to embrace prosocial behaviour and plural identities, yet the prevailing political climate in Québec continues to marginalize Muslims through social and political discourse and discriminatory laws. The curriculum itself is supposed to safeguard against “violent extremism” through critical dialogue and tolerance, yet mainstream political discourse in Québec has revolved around protecting a narrow, Euro-centric conception of Québec identity toward which Muslims, immigrants, and other racialized people are expected to “integrate.” Thus, the moral ambitions of CVE have not reconciled, or are in direct conflict with, the lived experience Muslim Quebecers who have been subject to systematic Othering in Québec through discourse and legislative actions such as the Québec Charter of Values debate and the recent hijab ban via Bill-21 (Bakali, 2015; Koussens, 2020). Bill-21 has especially problematic implications for Muslim students as it denies them the opportunity to see their identities reflected in teachers wearing the hijab and sends the message that expressions of their Muslim faith are not welcome in schools (Wells, 2019). Thus, despite the aspirational language in CVE policy and the ideals of CVE practitioners, we contend that the inherent contradictions of CVE and its collision with Québec’s political reality reaffirms its function as an instrument of social control and surveillance of Muslim Quebecers.

## Conclusion

Countering violent extremism (CVE) describes a field of policies and practices that take non-coercive approaches toward preventing individuals from “radicalization” that may lead to “violent extremism” or terrorism. Data from our study of CVE implementation in the Québec education sector finds that teachers, students, and elements of the school curriculum are being responsabilized for safeguarding society from the risk of “radicalization” and “violent extremism.” The school itself is viewed as a “frontline” institution in the fight against terrorism, re-orienting pedagogical methods, types of curricula delivered, and the ways teachers interact with students with the aim of terrorism prevention, in that they are seen as either “furthering risk” or “building resilience” to violent extremism. Within this, there is a sentiment among field practitioners that, due to budget constraints, social studies and humanities in high schools and colleges are not providing students with the critical thinking and digital literacy tools needed for proper resilience. Our study indicates that CVE in Québec exhibits several inherent contradictions, most notably as it aims to control “radicalization” among Muslims at the same time as trying to foster pluralism and combat forms of Islamophobia, racism, and prejudice embedded in mainstream Québec society. CVE, as a state-guided project, detracts from issues of systemic marginalization and political grievances tied to state practices, while obfuscating the continuation of Islamophobic CVE practices (i.e., “detection” and “intervention” with those “risky” and “at-risk”) that have been documented to have contributed to the stigmatization and securitization of Muslim communities (Heath-Kelly, 2013). Our work also sheds light on how CVE in the education sector, as conceived and practiced, enables state-sanctioned surveillance of Muslim students and communities.

With our study, we seek to initiate a critical dialogue in Canada on the incursion of CVE practices in the domain of social service provision. Further research ought to examine how CVE strategies fit broadly along other “problematizations” that neoliberal education policy is expected to tackle under the logic of “safeguarding” (Lewis, 2020). This includes examining how radicalization research and CVE strategies intersect with “deficit thinking” in education and the existing categories of “vulnerable” and “at-risk” students, which have been criticized for being problematically affixed to marginalized groups and for having stigmatizing effects (Toldson, 2019). In the context of CVE, Heath-Kelly (2013) has reflected on how “at-risk” populations are simultaneously framed as “risky,” blurring notions of vulnerability with potential dangerousness “to form a new subjectivity of ‘young people [who need to be protected] from harm or causing harm’” (p. 406). A final concern for critical examinations are on ways that the net of vulnerability is expanding and mutating due to CVE’s recent focus on substantively addressing forms of right-wing extremism, including hate crimes against Muslims. This raises questions on how CVE is experienced when it is applied to dominant, non-racialized members of society, and whether CVE, as its currently constituted, can manage to secure Muslims from right-wing violence without leading to a broader securitization of Muslim communities.

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## Appendix A: Sample Questions for Practitioner Interview Guide

### *Sample questions for practitioners:*

- Describe the type of work that you do (position, current responsibilities and projects). How long have you been involved in CVE? How were you recruited by the organization?
- What attracted you to this work? What were your initial impressions entering the field?
- What do you enjoy about this work currently? What are some of the challenges you have faced? What are some of the successes you have had?
- In what ways has your background influenced your approach or aided your success?
- Were there initiatives operating elsewhere that acted as a model for your project? Is there a book/author in the field of radicalization studies that stood out in influencing your work?
- What are some of the main lessons you have learned through your work (i.e. community outreach, interventions, program delivery)? What has surprised you, or struck you as interesting in terms of responses from the public?
- In your estimation what are the root causes driving this phenomenon? Are the societal/political reasons behind joining an extremist group different today than in previous times?