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Can education counter violent religious extremism?

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Abstracts/Résumés

Violent religious extremism is a global concern today. As governments prepare their counter-terrorism policies, many focus solely on reactive measures such as military action and surveillance measures – *hard power* – that are responsive to individuals who are already radicalized. This paper argues that education should be incorporated into such policies as a *preventive* measure that not only makes students resilient citizens but can also address the psychological, emotional and intellectual appeal of narratives – *soft power* – that terrorists purport. In doing so, states can counter soft power with the use of soft power in a concerted effort among government departments, social institutions and communities. Our paper clarifies the complexities among fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism and terrorism, and summarizes a variety of push and pull factors that trigger radicalization; it offers as well specific pedagogical recommendations for the Canadian educational system to consider.

Aujourd'hui, l'extrémisme religieux violent est une préoccupation à l'échelle internationale. Alors que certains gouvernements préparent leurs politiques antiterroristes, plusieurs autres ne se concentrent que sur des mesures réactives telles que les actions militaires et les mesures de surveillance accrue – *hard power* – visant particulièrement les personnes qui sont déjà radicalisées. Cet article souligne que l'éducation devrait être intégrée dans ces politiques comme une mesure préventive qui ne rend pas seulement les étudiants citoyens résilients, mais qui peut aussi s'attaquer au discours attrayant sur le plan psychologique, émotionnel et intellectuel – *soft power* – alimentés par les terroristes. Ce faisant, les États, à travers une action concertée entre les ministères, les institutions et les communautés, peuvent contrer le *soft power* en utilisant le *soft power*. Notre article explique les différences complexes entre le fondamentalisme, l'extrémisme, le radicalisme et le terrorisme, et met l'accent sur les différents facteurs qui déclenchent la radicalization. Il propose également des recommandations pédagogiques adaptées au système éducatif canadien.

Keywords: education; extremism; religion; violence; youth; pedagogy

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Introduction

The global proliferation of violent events motivated by religious extremism is raising concerns across all facets of society: they have communal, local, national and international implications in addition to threatening personal security. The security threat of terrorism permeates all sovereign borders and is not a phenomenon that occurs “over there” in the non-Western world. This is evident from terrorist attacks in London (July 2005), Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) which were carried out by individuals born in those countries. This article focuses exclusively on religious extremism due to its current crisis, although political and religious extremism have existed throughout history. In this paper, religious extremism is taken as a category; it does not discuss religion *per se*.

Religious extremism, particularly Islamist extremism, is viewed so much as a threat that religion courses are increasingly including political and security objectives. Even the *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (2007) published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), regarding the teaching of religious education in Europe, has incorporated strategic and political aims (Gearon 2013). It is evident that the relationship between intelligence agencies and communities and educational institutions is getting stronger in recent years (Gearon 2015).

With increasing frequency, youth in Canada, the United States and many other Western countries are reported to be actively involved in terrorist-related activities around the globe (Abarca 2014, Bell 2014, Scot 2014, Mullen 2015, Petrou 2015). A report from Public Safety Canada indicates that in early 2014, approximately 160 Canadians were fighting alongside foreign terrorist organizations, while an additional 80 are believed to have returned to Canada (CBC News 2015b). Currently, more than 150 Americans are fighting with Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East (Martosko 2015). In 2015, in Montreal alone six college students (two women and four men) are suspected to have left for Syria in January; in April, two students were arrested and charged with wanting to join jihadists groups overseas; and in May, 10 minors were arrested at the airport on their way to join jihad (CBC News 2015a, Feith 2015).

Recent events in the United States, Canada and European countries have demonstrated that religious extremism occurs *within* these Western countries as well, when considering terrorist activities such as the attacks in Brussels (2016) and Paris (2015), the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, the 2013 Boston Bombing, the plot to derail a VIA train from Toronto to New York in 2013, and the group known as the Toronto 18 who planned to detonate truck bombs in downtown Toronto in 2006. These events and several more have involved young people who have attended European, Canadian and American schools (see Goldman and Craig 2015).

There is nothing inherent in any religion or culture that either encourages terrorism or prevents it from motivating violence (Ginsburg and Megahed 2003). The protection of collective identities has been used by all religions to justify violent extremist actions. However, in the post-9/11 context, Islam has become the focus of attention in relation to extremism. Terrorism is neither confined to religious ideology nor to one religion, but since Islam is not concentrated in any one geographical area and Muslims live worldwide, the impact of Islamic extremism is more global as compared to extremists among Hindus and Buddhists, for example. Moreover, there is a tension between allegiance to one's state and the pull of religion in the diaspora that may clash.

Much theorizing has been done on the process overall, but several questions remain: Given similar conditions, why does one person become a religious extremist while another person does not? Why does religious extremism continue to be on the rise rather than on the decline? How do some seemingly well-adjusted and integrated young people commit terrorist acts at home and abroad, and for what reasons? Who is an extremist: in whose eyes? One person's extremist

may be another person's hero. For example, while Mahatma Gandhi is considered a hero in most parts of the world, there is a group of Hindu fundamentalists who consider his assassin to be one worthy of praise. To celebrate the assassin's killing of Gandhi, the *Hindu Mahashabha*¹ is planning to erect statues across India and a temple to worship the assassin. The issue of how a person is identified – as an extremist/terrorist or a hero – is complex to say the least.

To better understand religious extremism, this paper starts with a brief discussion of the significance of education to youth in their psycho-social and cognitive development. It presents the contextual background of the Canadian government's counter-terrorism policy and asks how education can counter religious extremism. This paper proposes that education should be seen as a valuable tool in countering religious extremism by building resilient communities through critical, ethical and active citizenship. After clarifying the differences among the terms fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism and terrorism, there is a discussion of push and pull factors toward religious extremism to which the Canadian educational system should respond. These factors identified in the literature guide our suggestions for pedagogical strategies to build resilience in Canadian students.

Youth and education

Youth

Those most susceptible to adopting extremist religious ideologies continue to be young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who are at a developmental age where they seek to uncover their own identity, look to bolster self-confidence and are in search of meaning in their lives (Bhui *et al.* 2012, Manuel 2014). This age group is very action oriented and is usually characterized by higher risk-taking. Thus, there is a vital need and urgency to uncover this demographic group's perception of religious extremism and citizenship engagement, especially as young Canadians and Americans continue to be disengaged from the civic sphere and lack an interest in public affairs (Library of Parliament 2012).

In 2001, the Islamic University in Gaza polled 1000 local youth aged 9–16 years old and found that 45 per cent of the students had actively participated in violence and 73 per cent wanted to become martyrs (Holland 2003). Despite large social and political differences between Gaza and Canada, the characteristics and trends among young students should not be ignored. Al-Badayneh (2011) elaborates on this concern in his consideration of universities as incubators for radicalization. His study on 190 students from Mutah University, Jordan, found that radical beliefs were highly concentrated on the ideas of martyrdom, violence, hatred and jihad. Al-Badayneh highlights the fertile and attractive nature of university students as they can be easily molded into becoming vocal activists for a perceived social change as this age group consists of “identity seekers, protection seekers, and rebels” with the vigor to cast their views into the wider society (2011, p. 40). He strongly suggests protective measures be taken by recognizing the university as an incubator for radicalism.

Education

When people think of terrorism, the typical solutions that come to mind involve expensive government surveillance, intelligence gathering and other coercive actions. The Canadian government's national counter-terrorism strategy aims to stop a terrorist attack rather than prevent the development of radicalization. We argue here that the emphases in Canadian counter-terrorism policies and programs thus far have been reactive rather than proactive and suggest that education should be considered a significant aspect in countering terrorism. The literature indicates

that transformative behavior is involved in the steps to religious extremism and radicalization (Moghaddam 2005, Wilner and Dubouloz 2011). As Gagné (2015a) emphasizes, education should be at the heart of anti-radicalization plans. Thus, we suggest that emphasis be placed on educating children for the development of life-long values, skills and behaviors that would be conducive to their economic, social and personal security by developing resiliency in students. This long-term approach would be shaped by both curriculum content and teaching methodology that fosters critical thinking and ethical behavior, which also imply changes in teacher education programs. Most importantly, students must see the relevance of what they learn, and be able to develop a critical understanding of the world. To a great extent, this will pre-empt some of the triggers that push and pull them on to the dangerous path toward radicalization, as described below.

While we consider education's role in countering religious extremism, many extremist groups have already recognized the pivotal role of education and focus on education as a means to promote their worldview. On the one hand, education that teaches extremist worldviews is used to exclusively promote extremist ideologies, such as the Taliban-controlled extremist schools in Pakistan (Mirahmadi et al. 2015). On the other hand, extremist groups use social media to recruit students at all levels of education, with psychological, intellectual and emotional appeal. In addition, Western education is eliminated where possible to prevent the teaching of non-Islamic ideology, such as the school attacks by Boko Haram (IRIN News 2012).

In this sense, youth are being radicalized by *soft power* because terrorist narratives and ideas appeal directly to youth by winning their "sympathy, support, and admiration" (Samuel 2012, p. 5). As such, it is naïve to assume that this soft power, used to enlist both males and females, can be met adequately with *hard power* – coercive and aggressive state measures that include military strategies and security tactics. These initiatives are reactive in their approach. The cost of fighting Islamic terrorism is estimated to be between one and five trillion American dollars (Biglan 2015). Despite a tremendous increase in cost and efforts toward countering terrorism, increasing numbers of young people are being radicalized. Terrorist attacks grew by 300 per cent between 2007 and 2013 (Biglan 2015). In comparison, education is significantly less expensive.

Education's role is proactive and preventive rather than reactive to extremist ideologies. Thus, the potential of education to both counter and promote religious extremism reinforces the salient value and role of education overall. Hence, in order to counter violent extremist ideology in the long term, in a preventive and cost-effective manner, education must be considered in the discourse on terrorism. This form of education must promote a critical understanding of the world and develop the values and skills of critical and resilient citizenship. As a matter of fact, as Gagné (2015b) forcefully argues, secular societies must denounce radicalization; education's role is to enable citizens to critique all religious tradition that stifles human dignity.

The Canadian government's counter-terrorism policy

The current Canadian approach to countering terrorism, entitled *Building resilience against terrorism: Canada's counter-terrorism strategy* (2012), which focuses on four aspects – prevent, detect, deny and respond – neglects to mention the role education can play in preventing extremism and in the development of a resilient community that would ensure public safety and harmony. Unlike the counter-terrorism measures in countries such as the United Kingdom, which feature education in their terrorism-related legislations and programs (United Kingdom Parliament 2015), even Canada's updated Counter Terrorism Bill C-51, tabled in May 2015, focuses on information sharing that is now subject to privacy limits, and to facilitate police action in detaining suspected extremists. A few pilot projects like the Terrorism Prevention Program (TPP) that

focus on Mosques and community members are being tried, but have not been incorporated into policies.

In the United Kingdom, a new counter-terrorism and security bill being debated in parliament calls for educational institutions from nursery to post-secondary levels to offer a wide range of knowledge and perspectives to develop students' critical thinking skills and the ability to make informed choices (Bradford's Action Plan 2013; Daily Hansard Debate 2014). This Bill includes students' participation in monitoring, detecting and intervening in early signs of behavior radicalization (Mendick and Verkaik 2015; RT News 2015). While this kind of policing activity would be greatly resisted in Canada, we need to acknowledge that education has a major role to play in this area of security.

How can education counter religious extremism?

If education is a moral enterprise (Nord and Haynes 1998) that develops and shapes minds, the phenomenon of home-grown terrorists should be a matter of utmost concern to educators. Some scholars suggest that such challenges fall outside the scope of schools in which formal education takes place, denying the political significance of this very important social institution (Bascaramurty 2011). Although it is valid to state "schools should not have to shoulder the burden of society's troubles," the reality is that these dilemmas surface within the classroom since the school is a microcosm of society (Gereluk 2012, p. 90, cited in Manuel 2014, p. 11). The issue is not whether such topics should be discussed, "but rather an explicit expectation that they will be" (Quartermaine 2014, p. 6).

Given the preeminent role of schools and education in the development of a peaceful and inclusive society (United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2006), there is an urgent need to explore the role of formal education in challenging religious extremism before beliefs become radicalized. Not all fundamentalists are extremists, nor do all extremists engage in terrorist activities aimed at harming large numbers of people. Fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism and terrorism are stages in the development of political, religious or ideological beliefs that build on one another. The role of education is to short-circuit this evolution.

In North America, unlike the European Union, very little attention has been paid to the role of education in countering violent extremism and terrorism. Currently, issues of religious extremism and terrorism are not addressed within the North American formal education systems. Failure to do so has prevented students from developing the ability to critically analyze extremist views in order to counter radicalization.

In the United Kingdom (and other parts of Europe including the Netherlands, Germany and, more recently, France) national and local governments, based on current legislation, have teamed up with educational institutions to develop and promote inclusive education in schools. However, in North America, schools have not been incorporated in such a way because counter-terrorism policies have not involved the educational sector.

Burgeoning literature on extremism and radicalism

The literature indicates that low levels of education and impoverished backgrounds are not characteristics of incarcerated extremists and terrorists (Davies 2008). The fact that many terrorists have higher education degrees implies that they spend a long time in school. Recently, the masked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) executioner called "Jihadi John," who is responsible for several brutal ISIS executions, was identified as a British computer programmer who studied at the University of Westminster, United Kingdom (Dearden 2015). Additionally, Anwar al-Awlaki, leader of al-Qaida, was in a PhD program at George Washington University before

involving himself in extremist movements (Brody 2015). There is also the question of whether extremist groups target the recruitment of certain professionals such as medical doctors and engineers, or if these people are naturally pulled to extremist propaganda (Samuel 2012).

A major shortcoming in the increasing literature on fundamentalism, religious extremism, radicalism and terrorism is a dearth of empirical studies on the relation between students and extremism, or of cognitive processes that involve identity transformation in individuals who radicalize (Wilner and Dubouloz 2011). However, there are many studies on media and terrorism (see Archetti 2012, Finch 2013, Lawrence et al. 2015). Furthermore, what is most unfortunate is that even the programs for tackling radicalization that exist are not adequately assessed.

One study by the United Kingdom Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) assesses community interventions in their ability to tackle religious extremism. Entitled *Preventing support for violent extremism through community interventions: a review of the evidence*, this is one of very few studies that assess programs that counter violent extremism (Pratchett et al. 2010). The study found that the two most successful radicalization interventions with young people were “capacity building or empowering young people” and interventions that “challenged ideology that focused on theology and used education or training.” Education and training in theology was also found to be successful in preventing violent religious extremism for Muslim women, although interventions that allowed women to debate and discuss theological issues were more successful.

The DCLG study highlighted the success of capacity-building and empowerment in preventing support for violent religious extremism within the wider community. It also emphasized that work delivered through outreach approaches was more successful than work taking place in formal institutions. It highlighted the importance of non-prescriptive education/training programs, where young people were able to “develop independent thinking or research and leadership skills,” allowing them to question and challenge a range of knowledge sources, including peers, radical groups and Internet sites (2010).

Concepts

Part of the burgeoning literature focuses on understanding the phenomenon of terrorism by exploring concepts such as fundamentalism and extremism. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. This section of the paper aims to raise awareness of the distinctions between the terms of fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism and terrorism.

Originally, *fundamentalists* were Protestants in early-twentieth-century America who sought to preserve the fundamentals of their religion. The modern day connotation is that of intolerance of *the other*. All religions have fundamentalists, but since fundamentalism in and of itself need not be a social or a security threat, the problem is the move to extremism as fundamentalists may be predisposed to extreme positions (Davies 2009). Education can respond to the shift in this position, which can be potentially dangerous to social security, by facilitating a learning process that is empowering to students.

Desmond Tutu defines *extremism* as “when you do not allow for a different point of view; when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive; when you don’t allow for the possibility of difference” (quoted in Davies 2009, p. 4). Extremism then, is the rejection of other perspectives. When this bent of mind leads to a moral hierarchy, whereby extreme positions are justified on moral grounds, the stage of radicalism begins.

Radicalism is central to homegrown Islamist terrorism, which is today the most pressing security threat in the Western world. It is both a mental and an emotional process that can prepare and motivate an individual to pursue violent behavior (Wilner and Dubouloz 2011). Radicalization sets off a process of change in the individual’s psycho-cognitive construction of

new identities that is a part of the changes in behavior associated with this stage. Moreover, there are different degrees of radicalization.

Radicalization may be followed by terrorist acts. This progression is a complex mix of politics and religion in the contemporary world because of the politicization of religion, like political Islam and Jewish extremism, as well as Christian, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalism. In an analysis of hundreds of suicide bombers over 25 years, Pape (2005) concludes that “religion is rarely the root cause” (p. 4). The goals are political (Institute for Economics and Peace 2014). Rather, exploitation of religious identity among young people feeds into political polarization (Sen 2006). While all terrorists are extremists, all extremists do not become terrorists. Only rarely do extremism and radicalism lead to terrorism and violence.

Terrorism may be defined as an act committed for a political, religious or ideological purpose with the intention of intimidating the public and threatening its security (Criminal Code 1985). Elworthy and Rifkind (2006) refer to terrorism as a tactic: “(it is) the level of anger and hate that drives people to join their ranks. It is that anger and hate which must be addressed” (p. 26). However, the motivations may not be limited to anger and hatred, and terrorists may also work for what they imagine to be a common good, a moral cause, a belief in a moral superiority that distinguishes them from other kinds of violence. This “moral good” must be tackled through a critical stance.

Security experts have described terrorism as a political act against governments and innocent civilians. Since extremism and terrorism are justified on moral grounds, they pose a particular challenge to educators. What is critical at all stages is transformative behavior. The lone-wolf terrorist – an individual who commits a violent act alone either out of anger or hatred against some group or in support of an extremist belief – may or may not follow the stages that generally lead to transformative behavior but, among many cases that have been studied, the progression toward terrorism tends to follow the phases explained below (Silber and Bhatt 2007). However, it is unsafe to assume that the lone-wolf terrorist, when acting alone and instigated by various reasons that may not include religious extremism, will necessarily follow these stages.

Explaining stages in transformative behavior: the theory

Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) point to the critical importance of taking action in the transformative learning process because it involves not only a sense of empowerment, but also a critical understanding of the ways in which social relations and culture have shaped an individual’s beliefs and feelings, and eventually the development of strategies for transformed behavior in quotidian activities. As a transformative phenomenon, radicalization happens suddenly or over a period of time through the trigger phase, the process of change phase and the outcome phase.

Moghaddam (2005) uses the metaphor of a narrowing staircase to describe the path to terrorism. We look at this phenomenon in similar fashion to progressing *from fundamentalism to extremism, to radicalism and terrorism*. The staircase progressively narrows as fewer people are persuaded to climb to the top and commit acts of violence. Everyone must be prevented from climbing the staircase (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The staircase to terrorism (Moghaddam 2005)

Educators must have the appropriate tools to recognize, understand and address the psychosocial factors that may lead to any stage in the path to terrorism. To do so, teachers and community members must recognize the push and pull factors toward radicalization to ensure a safe learning environment for students.

Possible causes for engaging in extremist behavior

Push and pull factors that exist both marginalize and entice those who are attracted to extremist ideologies. Individuals climb the first step in the staircase due to push factors such as:

- A *threat to individual and collective identity*, which occurs when one feels that one's ethnicity, culture or religion is threatened at a personal or group level. Furthermore, psychological research points to the fundamental importance of *perceived* deprivation and threats to personal or collective identity (Taylor 1994), which have been identified as a possible cause of violence. A challenge to one's identity is of particular significance in the case of religious extremists because of the unique ability of religion to serve identity needs (Seul 1999). Perceived threats to both personal and collective identities result in alienation or humiliation leading to hatred and anger, and pose challenges to human security (see Bhui et al. 2012).
- *Marginalization from mainstream society*, when one is not recognized, or misrecognized (Taylor 1994), as a member of a social group, such as in instances of discrimination, segregation or bullying (Keddie 1998). This results in marginalization from mainstream society and may contribute to fundamentalism and radicalization evolving into terrorism (Bhui et al. 2012).
- A feeling of *ideological necessity*, when one is moved by the plight of the group one identifies with, especially when one views mistreatment toward the group. Some young people experience a profound "sense of injustice" with what they see going on in Syria at this time. They may think or be convinced to think that it is their sacred duty to take revenge (Bhui et al. 2012). Recently, in Bangladesh, a secularist blogger was hacked to death by students from extremist *madrassas* (Islamic schools) at the instigation of an acquaintance who objected to the anti-Islamist sentiments in the blogs. But the killers themselves had not read the blogs (Barry 2015).
- *Hatred of and looking for revenge against a group*, such as that toward Western nations for invading Afghanistan or Iraq, which leads radicalized individuals to believe that murder is justified, and killing the enemy (even civilians) is morally right (see Linden and Klandermans 2006).
- A *politically or religiously motivated stance*, by using religion as a socio-political guide for one's actions. Generally, Western radicals are less versed in theology than their international counterparts and are poorly equipped to appreciate the intricate nuances of their religious beliefs. As the forces of globalization (modernization, urbanization, secularism, displacement, hi-tech communications and so on) create tensions for young Western Muslims, radicalization is one way disenfranchised Western Muslim youths have gone about reasserting their religious identity within non-Muslim contexts (Roy 2004).
- Looking for *meaning in life* occurs when individuals seek significance and a reason for living. Extremist propaganda addresses this void successfully, such as for those more vulnerable as a result of depression (Kruglansky and Webber 2014). Other reasons include personal tragedy and boredom, which can lead individuals to seek a meaning in life.
 - For some, a *personal tragedy* may prompt a break with one's life toward radical ideology as, for example, brought about by the death of a loved one (Bhui et al. 2012, Saunders 2012).

- *Boredom* can be a trigger for some who belong to comfortable backgrounds and have had everything in life. Some supporters of Islamic terrorism, for example, are neither alienated nor deprived but are seeking adventure through affiliation with the goals of terrorist groups. For these individuals who seek excitement and adventure, the thrill of using weapons is seen to be “cool” (Samuel 2012, p. 12).
- *Globalization* encourages religious fundamentalism by facilitating the global reach of terrorist organizations. Ştibli (2010) points out that the Islamic terrorist networks are unique in their global reach and decentralized nature that penetrates political boundaries in their spread of propaganda and recruitment through very flexible and mobile networks.
- Technology and media bring *news and ideas that appeal to one’s imagination*. For example, in *Jihadist and the Internet*, the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (2009) reaffirms that terrorist and extremist websites contribute to the process of radicalization through “ideology formation, ideology reinforcement and ideological indoctrination” (p. 10). The multilingual character of these websites appeals to both regional and diaspora communities to virtually connect easily in a way that was unthinkable before the globalization of technology. In addition, the speed with which information flows and the anonymity it provides makes cyberspace an empowering, and less inhibiting and safe, place.
- *Underlying, enduring and systemic inequalities* may also lead an individual to radicalized or violent responses in order to attain the basic securities they need. Such daily concerns over fundamental human security include the “provision of clean drinking water, education, vaccination programs, provision of food and shelter, and protection from violence, military or otherwise” (Benavides *et al.* 2011, p. 204).

Any one, but usually an interaction, of these factors can put an individual onto the first step in the staircase. It is only when one is on the first step that pull factors have an impact. Some pull factors when considering religious extremism include:

- *Media stories and messages* depicting the West as the source of evil, immorality and inequality. These narratives allure individuals and aim to evoke sympathy in vulnerable individuals who may not be familiar with the complexities of the situations. These narratives reinforce existing ideological beliefs in some individuals. Additionally, some extremist groups take advantage of poverty, unemployment and a lack of education to lure potential recruits and justify violent acts (Ersen and Kibaroglu 2011).
- *Peer group pressure* has tremendous influence to convert many young men and women in schools and universities to extremism and radicalization, such as the example of the three United Kingdom high school friends who left for Syria together (Elgot 2015).
- Several radicalized groups mindfully cast out a *network of local radicalized recruiters* to instigate, convince and recruit young and vulnerable youth to commit crimes in the name of religion. Radical lectures, sermons or speeches are shared digitally and in person to propagate extremist views, such as Al Qaida which has radical religious leaders worldwide (Braniff, 2015).
- *Promises of a better or more purposed life* entice youth and individuals who seek a meaning and purpose to their life. Messages may include beautiful promises of an afterlife that would be achieved only through self-sacrifice, martyrdom or killing people in the name of God (Anderson 2006). As Juergensmeyer (2000) points out, the idea of violence as performance (with obvious connections to religious ritual) is a symbol within a cosmic war, where suicide bombers become martyrs and their opponents are demonized.

Education must address both those who are at risk and those students whose actions may, deliberately or inadvertently, marginalize *the other*. Together, they push and pull one another into their respective corners, perpetuate their extrapolating perspectives and lead some toward the staircase to terrorism. To attenuate the tension, education must and can address both groups of students.

Possible ways education can build resilient communities

As globalized societies become increasingly multicultural and multi-religious, there is a tendency for homogeneity in some cultural aspects and marginalization of certain individuals. This can induce psycho-cognitive and behavioral transformation to fundamentalism. Education can bridge this gap through discussions of extremism, radicalism and other sensitive issues that are problems in society. The following are four applicable approaches for the Canadian education system to consider for good education but which will act as means to counter violent religious extremism:

- (1) *Promote values of citizenship and diversity.* Citizenship education must both instill a strong sense of affiliation to the state and develop a vision for the common good, keeping in mind the diversity of the society. There is an urgent need to explore the role of formal education in working toward a strong sense of “belonging” and citizenship that makes communities resilient to developing violent ideologies (HM Government 2011). However, as societies are increasingly diverse, schools should develop an understanding of “difference” via education so that those who are “different” can have positive identities and self-concept and develop this sense of “belonging.” As bell hooks (2000), an American author, feminist and social activist, says, we “do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity” (p. 67). Understanding, respecting and appreciating difference, not its eradication or non-recognition, should become a bridge to human connection. Specifically, critical citizenship education should be incorporated to foster an understanding of vulnerability and human security. Through human rights and critical citizenship education we can understand and define human connection, which is the emotional core of human identity. The potential clash of allegiance to the state versus that to Islam faced by students in many non-Muslim countries needs to be tackled with discussions of multiple identities and how to prioritize them. Schools must help young people become critical thinkers and question normalized and taken-for-granted behavior (through critical media and religious literacy) (Gagné 2015b). Resilience to extremist views must be built and students need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to not just ignore, but argue against, extremist positions. Education should aim to develop in students the ability and the disposition to arrive independently at critical and informed opinions, such as education’s important aim to safeguard students from drugs, gang violence and violent ideologies.

This form of quality citizenship education is deeply concerned with student experiences and religious identity construction, so that they are not marginalized and pushed further away from their social surroundings whereby they seek a sense of belonging among fringe activities and groups. Diversity education along with religious literacy will produce a civil and informed electorate essential for democratic participation and social/domestic violence prevention.

- (2) *Critical education to develop an understanding of history and power relations in society.* The importance of training students to think historically is related to the fact that it equips students with the conceptual and methodological tools that will equip them for daily social issues in today’s multicultural realities. More importantly, by recognizing and

acknowledging the historical influences and power relations embedded in society, students develop and practice the habits of mind that are vital for critical citizenship, one that aims to reconstruct society to be just and democratic for all (Tsagkaraki 2016). A critical view of the “perfect world order” is essential so that meaningful relationships can enable one to make comparative judgments. This can prevent simplistic binary understandings (good/bad) and absolutist views, which are used by extremists, but they can be challenged by critical and relational thinking to make way for accepting alternative worldviews and “the other.”

- (3) *Religious literacy to promote knowledge of the other.* Moore (2006) defines religious literacy as the ability to discern through multiple lenses and analyze the convergence of religious, social, political and cultural spheres that have occurred throughout history. In doing so, religious literacy respects diversity but can recognize that certain cultural beliefs are dehumanizing. This ability to discern the interplay of religious, social, political and cultural factors is essential in avoiding confrontation about religious ideology (as opposed to spirituality). Religious literacy can foster the spaces to develop the moral stance necessary to recognize *the other*. We will not discuss here the dangers of misrepresenting religious education for indoctrination and other political ends, given the limitations of this paper.
- (4) *Media literacy.* The unpredictable nature of terrorist acts, permeability of national borders and the recruitment of youth from various socio-economic, religious, cultural and educational backgrounds make digital media the main and occasionally only source for accessing information on extremist ideologies. There is a symbiotic relationship between terrorists and the media: on the one hand, terrorists thrive on the “oxygen of publicity” (Wilkinson 1997, Biglan 2015); on the other hand, in a fiercely competitive media environment, media outlets scramble to cover the events (Nacos 2007) and unwittingly help publicize the message of the enemy. Given the dangerous dependency between terrorism and the media, it is imperative to explore the impact of digital media messages in the personal realm of students. These narratives appeal to the emotions and can drive individuals and vulnerable youth toward extremist causes. Uncritical consumption of digital media and a lack of critical media consciousness among the population, especially among potential youth recruits, pose an unprecedented danger to the security of Western nations.

The messages from extremist groups appear through digital media, and in the last decade, we have witnessed the increased influence of interactive social media in particular. In a decade-long study, Weimann (2012) found that 90 per cent of organized terrorism online takes place via social media. These groups spread their message, gather information and recruit members through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and several other social media outlets on the Internet. The role of social media in extremist propaganda is still being explored: Berger and Morgan (2015) point out there is an information vacuum regarding the effectiveness of highly organized online activities. Moreover, the examination of small subsets of users may create misleading conclusions.

Our belief is that critical education, especially critical citizenship, human rights education and media and religious literacy can be effective in the prevention of extremist religious views, and we argue that *additional focus* on extremism is required in existing curriculum material that covers citizenship, multicultural and social cohesion issues as well as religion and ethics courses. Furthermore, it has been argued that a narrative and curriculum specifically directed against the narratives of the extremist ideologies should be developed to counter religious extremism. The curriculum should develop awareness of dangers involved in the extremist propaganda for students, and expose students to their vulnerabilities to “the seductive character of a Utopian

worldview” (Sieckelink *et al.* 2015, p. 339). The following section describes specific teaching methods that can foster these four approaches.

Teaching methods: the need to challenge beliefs before they become radicalized

Given that education is a tool to combat ignorance and develop critical thinking, *critical pedagogy* offers a platform to study how terrorism can be combated. This is done by using action-oriented methods of teaching aimed at developing the critical abilities of children to actively engage in and question the world around them. This ability to analyze and question ideas and content is particularly valuable when preventing the development of extremist beliefs that could potentially lead to terrorism.

The *interpretive approach* (Jackson 1997) encourages students and teachers alike to understand various representations of a religious group and the nuanced beliefs and practices within and among each group, critique and understand the interpretations they are presented with, and reflect on their personal interpretations and understanding of each group. Using this approach, teachers can be guided to critically engage students to consider the nature of religious extremism and its outcomes. Students develop their understanding by oscillating between their own concepts and experiences and those of others. The failure to explore varieties of interpretations could prevent students from engaging critically with absolute claims to truth and good, two essential elements in the belief systems of terrorists. Reassessing the students’ own way of life through a new understanding, and critically thinking about the views of others, should be part of the social construct of every classroom (Miller 2013). This can also provide an effective method of countering extremist beliefs given that alienation and threats to one’s identity are significant in the development of radicalism, which may potentially lead to violence. The *interpretive approach* minimizes isolation as students dialogue with and learn from each other.

Critical perspectives would be enriched with relational theorizing by focusing on the relational aspect of human identity, since identity is formed through relationships (Ross 2013). Knowledge of the other involves a moral position based on the recognition of the importance of responsibility as well as empathy and moral responsiveness, and is not merely a cognitive function. Education must have a moral purpose, a moral stance, particularly at this point in the history of a world that is terrorized.

Teacher education

Any discussion of ideologies necessarily involves the values and beliefs of teachers themselves. It is therefore imperative for teachers to be introspective and look into their own worldviews and biases before they facilitate students in examining their own beliefs. In consideration of Jackson’s *interpretive approach*, teachers must understand some of the complexities of extremism and be able to analyze and discern the various representations that exist among extremists, interpret the content in social media and their given resources themselves, and reflect on their personal understanding of issues alongside their students. In doing so, educators are better equipped to guide students through a similar practice of critique, inquiry and reflexivity.

Currently, Canadian teachers are not adequately trained and prepared to discuss controversial issues in the classroom and approach sensitive topics that are politically charged (Manuel 2014), such as religious extremism in the classroom and in the school environment, despite occurrences of Canadian youth involvement in terrorist activities. Research indicates that teachers avoid such topics in class because they are uncomfortable and unsure of how to establish ground rules for discussion. Nor can they refer to pedagogical resources because, unlike some European countries

that provide teachers with guidance material on such issues, there is presently nothing in Canada to aid teachers.

Conclusion

This paper argues that education should be an important component complementing counter-terrorism policies. Terrorism is the extreme end of a number of psycho-social stages which progress from fundamentalism to extremism to radicalization, and finally to a violent act aimed at instilling fear and terror in governments and the general public. The home-grown extremist is a matter of concern for Western countries like Canada and the United States of America. It is unlikely that a single theory can integrate all the different reasons that make a person an extremist or a terrorist.

The fact that religious extremism has provoked youth who have been educated in Western nations to carry out terrorist acts in their countries, the most recent being the Brussels bombings in March 2016, should be a matter of great concern to policy makers and to educators. This paper proposes a focus on education's role as a proactive means of short-circuiting the progression through the stages from fundamentalism to extremism. It enumerates the possible causes why youth are attracted by the narratives of radical organizations as identified in the literature, and suggests pedagogical methods in education for building resilient communities.

The critical question is: why does one person become radicalized and another does not?

Individuals process knowledge in different ways, and radicalize in different ways and for different purposes. Since 9/11, the literature on terrorism and preventive counter-terrorism programs has burgeoned. However, most of this literature does not deal with the psycho-cognitive changes that individuals experience in different ways. Education can help students in the transformative process to channel their anxieties away from oppositional behavior toward creative endeavors. Schools need to work with the community and parents to critically challenge religious extremism *before* beliefs are radicalized. Once extremist positions have developed, de-radicalization is a long-term process that involves deconstructing complex ideologies.

Given the continuing and exponential rise in religious extremism, one must ask why so many non-formal and surveillance efforts and so much money to prevent extremism have had negligible effects. One reason is that a long-term approach such as education cannot have immediate effects, and existing non-formal programs are difficult to assess because randomized trials are problematic in education. To be effective, the right kind of educational measures will have to run their course to make a difference.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. The Hindu Mahasabha is closely associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist voluntary non-governmental organization which in turn is associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party currently in power in India.

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