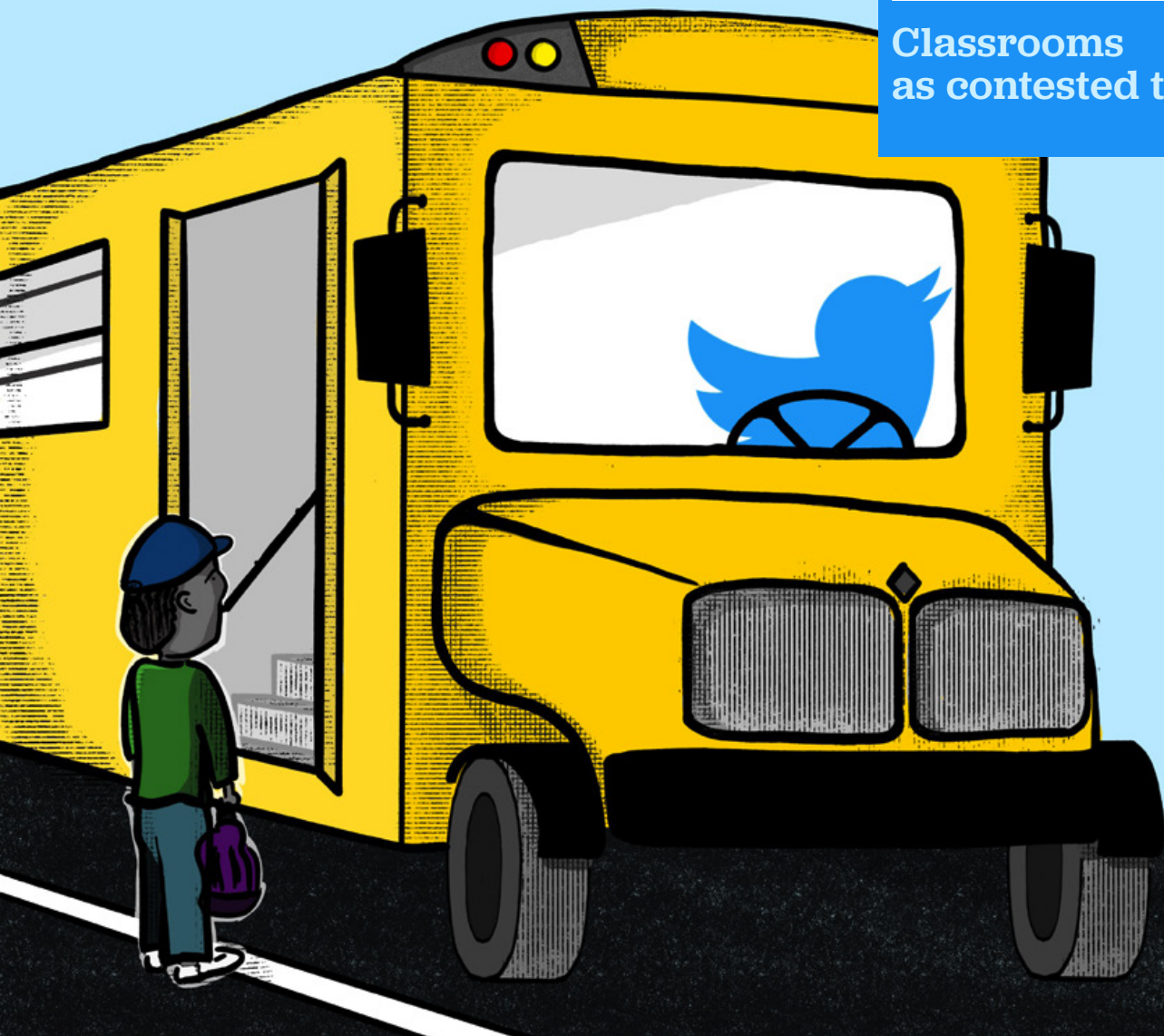# Our Schools/Our Selves

The Voice Of Progressive Education In Canada
Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Winter/Spring 2023

EDUCATION, DISINFORMATION, LIBERATION

Classrooms as contested terrain

Class(room) consciousness

Erika Shaker

There's no such thing as neutral education.
—*Paulo Freire*

I've often said that the work we do at CCPA fills me with both gratitude and pride. I still refer to this job as work I "get" to do, because I fundamentally believe that it is a privilege.

Though I'm in a relatively new role since I began at CCPA, my passion project continues to be education. I see it as the first and the last line of defense against the daily attacks on democratic progress and the rise of the far right.

There are many reasons for this: I've often said that education provides an organic, community-based on-ramp to bigger conversations — "What do I want my kid's classroom to look like" can evolve into a "how do we get the money, and what's the fairest and most equitable way to ensure no one is left behind" debate — and boom! We're in the middle of a discussion about tax policy and an equitable distribution of resources.

Because education is so community-focused, we witness the on-the-ground impact of higher level decisions in real time, which is often heartbreaking, frustrating and infuriating. It's also gotten exponentially more depressing in the context of the education wars and the full-throated attack on public education specifically — but really, public institutions in general. Believe me when I say that I am really,

really feeling this today — as a graduate of the public system, as someone who was raised by someone who taught in the public system, and as a parent whose children are both in the public system. The Ontario government's recent attack on the collective bargaining rights of the lowest paid education workers — the ones who literally keep the lights on and turn them off at the end of the day, and who provide support for some of the most vulnerable kids — is truly devastating.

But it means I also see the dedication and creativity of people at all levels of the education system who are fighting with everything they have to make it better, more inclusive, more equitable, and a better defense against the tide of disinformation and regressive pushback to hardfought progressive gains. We need this now, more than ever.

The incredible public and labour response to the Ontario government's use of the Notwithstanding Clause to shut down collective bargaining rights, is a clear demonstration of the power of progressive narratives and public organizing.

And really, I think, that needs to be the starting point — the recognition that every socially progressive advancement isn't a ceiling. It's a new floor. And we need to fight like hell, all of us, to keep that floor and continue to raise it. We can take no gains for granted…and we cannot allow subsequent generations to forget the process by which those gains were made

and who benefited as a result — in education, and more broadly.

I've learned a lot over my almost three decades in this education work, and certainly after having two children in the system and bearing witness firsthand to how things have changed — for better, and for worse.

But the stakes are getting progressively higher, as a healthy distrust of authority slips into the triumph of individualism over collective responsibility, healthy ecosystems, and the common good. And given the current climate of disinformation, where "did my own research" and the new anti-elitism that seems paradoxically deferential to authoritarianism are evermore commonplace, where does that leave public institutions that are, ostensibly, about socialization, empowerment, and the acquisition of knowledge?

The appalling lack of not just class analysis, but of class consciousness, has allowed conservatives to make gains in claiming to represent the "ordinary worker." This would be laughable but for the fact that there doesn't seem to be an equally compelling and unapologetic progressive narrative contesting it — at least at the political level. When progressives focus on the middle class frame and neglect the working class frame, we allow the conversation to shift from what people *do*, to what they can *buy*. Think about how the federal Minister of Middle Class Prosperity — remember when that was a thing — talked about how being middle class meant you could afford to put your kids in hockey?

Contrast that with Pierre Poilievre's transparent attempts to appear "of the people" by talking about barn building, with all sorts of veiled references to what Canada "used" to be like in the good old days (whatever they were). Or when the Ontario Labour Minister talked about how the province was built by people who shower "at the end of the day, not the start". Of course it's clumsy — but what I'm more interested in is the intent — the (coded) language being used, the intended audience, and whether it's resonating.

That said, neither frame is progressive: one's fully bought into neoliberalism and consumption, the other into cold-blooded capitalism and patriarchy. We need to re-triple our efforts in demanding and working for an option that's unapologetically worker-centric, feminist, anti-colonialist, anti-racist, sustainable and collectivist.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* looks at the role of the school in the midst of the culture wars and the current climate of disinformation: the school as a target and potential tool for regressive forces, or the school as a mechanism for liberation and empowerment. But it's not just the classroom content we need to examine. It's the governance structure by which decision-makers are elected and where decisions are made. It's the rhetorical devices employed and the (often coded) language used to describe the school, as well as its relationship with and responsibilities to the broader community. It's the way the school can challenge systemic oppressions, or replicate and naturalize them. And it's the targets that are selected — usually

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the most vulnerable — as scapegoats to justify more control, more standardization, less diversity.

What this means, of course, is that we need to be much more conscientious about teaching the history of social movements and the progress that's been made (as well as the risks of moving backwards). We can take nothing for granted in the face of forces that continue to organize against a robust public infrastructure and the social gains that it enables and encourages. It's the ongoing work — and the work *between* elections — that creates a force for progress and change that politicians of all political stripes ignore at their peril. The right has understood this for decades. Progressives need to up our game.

As we protect the gains we've made, we must continue to make progress by centring the most vulnerable in that trajectory. We need to listen to our allies when they tell us they are not well-served by the systems in place; we can and must always do better, and cannot be driven by defensiveness to protect a status quo that's unacceptable and insufficient merely because it's under attack. That fundamentally undermines social and class solidarity when we need it most.

Finally, we need to get much better at owning up to our own assumptions and even mistakes — or even admitting what we don't know.

Sometimes this means taking a more thoughtful approach to the actions we take, leaving room to acknowledge that things may change as more information becomes available — and this became very clear during the pandemic. Of course this does not mean we don't take a stand and defend it. On the contrary, we need to be much clearer about what we stand for and what we're prepared to do to defend it.

Of course, facts matter. I work for a think tank and we deal in facts. But it's simply not enough to be correct — we also need to be compelling. We need to put those facts in context, we need to do it with compassion, and we need to make sure it makes sense. Not just to people we know: these narratives must also speak to, resonate with and amplify the experiences of those most impacted by the inequality and injustice we want to reverse — and it starts with listening and learning.

Which brings me back to where we started — Education.

And, fundamentally, education is about the collective — how we care for, nurture, support and guide other people's children, not just our own — and the future — educating students not to fit into an imperfect world, but to identify and understand its inadequacies and injustices and change it for the better.

We need to continue to create the conditions to build new floors. And smash old ceilings. ◉

It doesn't add up

What's missing from the CHOICE = FREEDOM equation?

Bárbara Silva

For as long as almost anyone can remember, humans have had a penchant for simple solutions. Sometimes that drive to make things simpler has resulted in amazing technological advances, and other times over-simplification has been used to try to solve more complex issues.

For decades, the right-wing neoliberal movement has oversimplified solutions to problems like the housing crisis, wage inequality, and food insecurity by championing, and moralizing choice.

Solution to the housing crisis? Simple — just choose to stop buying that daily coffee and save up!

Want to be healthier? Easy — make smarter choices about the foods you eat.

Stuck in a low paying job? Choose better employment!

The message on repeat is that good people, hard working people, make the *right* choices to own homes, to be healthy and have job security. It has been a successful message for those who righteously believe they have simply made the "right choices" in life.

Since Milton Friedman's simple market based solutions, right wing neoliberal movements have found a simple equation for the general public — after all, who doesn't love simple math?

For decades the right has campaigned on an easy, and virtuous formula for success in life:

CHOICE = FREEDOM

Freedom, as a personal right, has seen a resurgence in the current lexicon of societies around the globe. Freedom to travel, to not vaccinate or wear a mask, to choose health care, or education are all topics that have been circulating over the past few years — perhaps in Canada more so now than ever. The notion that choice is synonymous with freedom is both deliberate and calculated in its simplicity.

Public education has not gone unscathed by this messaging; in fact "parent choice" in education has been a priority for American conservatives since the era of desegregation.

However, in this oversimplified equation — **CHOICE = FREEDOM** — the left side does not equal the right side no matter how often it is repeated (sometimes through a bullhorn). In all reality, the equation is invalid, because as

those who do not have choice can confirm, it is actually an inequality.

Choice may play a role in personal freedom, but it is an insignificant parameter.

CHOICE = FREEDOM is actually an inequality, both mathematically and socially.

In fact, the equation can only achieve balance once we acknowledge that an entire parameter is missing.

The equation that should be at the forefront of all public policy should be:

CHOICE + UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY = FREEDOM

Where ACCESSIBILITY > CHOICE

Because in the quest for "freedom," accessibility is a far greater parameter than choice.

Freedom comes when you don't have to line up overnight to get your child into the "right" preschool.

Freedom comes with not having to sacrifice your health and well-being, or working two jobs to access education for your children.

There is actually *more* freedom for people when they are not burdened by having to make choices around which basic human right they must set aside.

Imagine no barriers to excellent high quality health care, public transit, public and post secondary education?

Imagine not having to choose a "special" school because all children have access to high quality inclusive curriculum through a well-funded public system?

This is what I mean when I say that **ACCESSIBILITY > CHOICE**.

So why has choice been so highly valued? And why does it permeate every aspect of our culture?

Even in the private sector choice has seeped into practices that once were free of controversy. Almost weekly we hear stories of airline passengers refusing to, when asked, give up seats so families can sit together proclaiming "I paid to choose my seat, so people should have to do the same for their kids" or something similar. Instantly the simple request becomes a battleground for individual rights, and the morality of being a good and responsible parent. Few consider that the airline has a responsibility to seat minors with caregivers, and

that it is in everyone's interest that a child be seated with their caregiver.

It used to be this way. For decades, the norm was little to no choice in seating. It was a given that you were seated with the people you booked with. Now, there's "choice" (for a fee) and everyone is expected to pay it, even to ensure a minor is seated with their parents. It's not feasible for a 4-year-old to sit by themselves for a flight, yet the dialogue now is about personal responsibility. Few consider their role in creating an environment that pits passengers against one another instead of the common good. But that we have all come to accept this has enabled corporations to commodify all aspects of flying, from seats, to carry on luggage fees, to water and snacks.

These same economists and policy makers want to treat education in the same way, as a commodity. They believe education should be marketed like airline seats, cheese or shoes, and should be subject to competition. The inherent problem is that in the same way not everyone can afford to buy stilton cheese or Air Jordans, not every family can afford the cost of private education. For many families, no amount of sacrifice, or saving will provide that option, and yet their children are equally deserving of a high quality, accessible education.

The simple math associated with **CHOICE = FREEDOM** promotes that good ol' conservative bootstrap ideology, and reinforces a sense of morality and self-righteousness. "I deserve it, I made the *right* choices, that is why I have a house/my kids are in private schools." This extends to decisions about "prioritizing" one's health too — though we know that the "choices" to buy organic or go to the gym or have access to safe and public facilities are not available to everyone.

The ability to "make choices" has become a righteous position, and those able to make them are often oblivious to the fact that not everyone has the same choices, and choice is all too often a function of social and economic privilege.

The result of the proliferation of "school choice" is that some schools are now places where students are segregated along lines of ability, religion and socio-economic status. This siloing of students runs contrary to the premise of public education, and prioritizes individual preferences over collective benefits. As one parent recently stated:

Public schools are one of the only places where kids learn that not everyone shares their

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personal experiences, and that there are kids who are both better off and worse off than they are, kids with different belief systems or family structures. There is value to this experience for all of society, and I think government's job should be to make funding choices that support the greater social good over the preferences of certain individuals. (https://albertaviews.ca/individualism-run-amok/)

Where choice is prioritized, public schools are less and less places where children from all walks of life can learn and grow across socioeconomic, cultural and religious differences. Schools become places of homogeneity. Schools are no longer seen as a place or opportunity to overcome social differences, but through choice, are now ways to replicate and reinforce social inequities. This kind of segregation does not support social democracy at large.

And unfortunately, all of this choice is happening using public funds.

Choice proponents will argue that choice encourages competition amongst schools.

But why should any child have to compete for access to a high quality, barrier-free education? Knowledge is not a finite quantity, there isn't just so much of it to go around. It's infinite and, as a basic human right, must be accessible to all children.

Secondly, diverting access to resources and diluting the public system is not actually creating the competition school choice proponents claim. In fact publicly funding private schools tips the scales in favour of the already privileged.

Finally, providing people with public funding to facilitate the choice to leave the public system and attend private schools is a type of voucher. The effects of vouchers are well documented in the U.S., and even libertarians and neoliberals are recognizing the failure of vouchers to meet their original intention.

School choice was never about true competition (if competition even has a place in any discussion about a human right), or elevating public education; it has always been used as a guise for privilege and segregation.

The hope of school choice was that the worst-off kids could be given the same opportunities as those born with silver spoons in their mouths. But if what parents are most interested in is keeping their children away from those kids (at least in large numbers), that hope cannot be fulfilled. Improving the quality of instruction can make everyone better off; peer group, on the other hand, is a zero-sum game, where every child who improves their peer group must be counterbalanced by one who is pushed out. (Bloomberg)

It is imperative that we do not follow the oversimplified slogan around educational choice, and not fall for any kind of voucher system that allows public dollars to leave the public system.

Vouchers are dangerous to American education. They promise an all-too-simple solution to tough problems like unequal access to high-quality schools, segregation and even school safety. (Hechinger Report)

In the deeply flawed **CHOICE = FREEDOM** equation, universal accessibility is the missing constant. Providing all students equitable access to high quality public education, and all to all public services for that matter, is entirely possible. Countries like Finland achieve high quality public education that includes teaching several languages as base curriculum. Countries like Germany, Finland and Austria provide free post-secondary education to *any* applicant, irrespective of country of origin. And we need not stop at education: Luxembourg is one of several jurisdictions that have implemented free universal public transportation.

CHOICE = FREEDOM has been an easy, simple and appealing solution for society and it has gone entirely unopposed, even accepted and reiterated (albeit with perhaps less bloodthirsty vehemence) by progressives over the past five decades. It pits individuals against one another and absolves governments and systems of their role in promoting equity.

It's time for progressives to recognize the flaw in the idea that **CHOICE = FREEDOM**. Time to take a red pen to this equation and correct it accordingly, so that **ACCESSIBILITY** can be reintroduced into the equation, leveling the playing field for children in every community.

We can envision a public system where accessibility for those in the margins, those with disabilities, racialized children, vulnerable children, children living in poverty isn't a choice, but an inalienable right. When we centre the needs of all kids — especially those for whom

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their relationship with "choice" is fraught — when we build a system around those students instead of those able to choose, we will create a truly universal, equitable and accessible public education system where all children can flourish. Not because they or their family made the "right" choices — but because they have a right to the very best we can provide.

Our children — all our children — deserve nothing less.

It's time to stop funding private schools, it's time to recognize that choice promotes inequality and reintroduce accessibility as the key parameter towards greater social freedom. ⊙

Bárbara Silva is a public education advocate, organizer and activist, with degrees in both Chemical Engineering and Education. She is most passionate about building support for an equitable and accessible public education system and creating awareness about the proliferation of privatization across Canada. In 2015, Bárbara co-founded the citizen-run public education advocacy organization Support Our Students Alberta, which led several campaigns and rallies in defense of public education across the province.

An earlier version of this article appeared as a backgrounder from the Institute for Public Education (IPE). For more about the IPE, please visit https://instituteforpubliceducation.org/

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Disinformation, control and liberation

Default discomfort and educational politics at play

Codie Fortin Lalonde
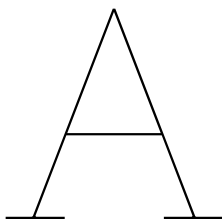
A few years ago, when Ontario's then-topical new (2015) sex education curriculum came up in conversation, an aerospace engineer lamented over a plate of nachos that learning about different sexualities could "influence children" — a sentiment steeped in homo- and trans-phobia.

In 2018 that Liberal curriculum would be significantly scaled back by the incoming Conservative government, who argued that parents have the right to "choose" what their children learn about gender identity, expression, and sexuality. (Some might suggest that this narrative was central to their campaign.) More recently, Ontario's government scrapped anti-racist language from the updated math curriculum and Indigenous knowledge framework from the science curriculum.

In 2019, touting parental rights, Alberta's government repealed the previous NDP government's (Bill 24) protections around disclosure of students' participation in gay-straight alliances and queer-straight alliances.

Recently, while visiting a friend in Alberta, I was treated to the secondhand claim that teachers now must respect the right of students to identify as animals or inanimate objects "like a table." In the silence that followed, I replied "that sounds like one of those overly exaggerated slippery slope reactions to respecting gender identity." (The text of the document being referred to can be found in the box on the following page entitled "Respecting an individual's right to self-determination.")

The topic of conversation changed fairly quickly.

Not long after, I came across a twitter thread by the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District refuting harmful claims circulated online that schools were placing litter boxes in hallways for students who identify as cats.

Other petitions have circulated, calling these guidelines for *Creating learning environments that respect diverse sexual orientations, gender*

identities and gender expressions "totalitarian" and "anti-Catholic".

The damaging nature and dangerous intention in claims trivializing gender identity and framing those who may identify differently than their birth-assigned gender as non-human are obvious. But this is how disinformation and misinformation spreads and, in this instance, how it stokes the embers of longstanding and transphobic "bathroom debates."

Socioeconomic hierarchy and moral panic
The curriculum developments and classroom advancements I've referenced above have something in common: by being more inclusive, they decentre the default identity — what's considered "normal".

And while the negative actions I've also referenced can run the gamut from dismissal, ridicule, rhetorical and ideological gymnastics (often full of fallacies that can be characterized as mis- and dis-information), to outright aggression, and violence[1] — and can even contain several or all of these elements simultaneously — they have something in common too. They're a demand — sometimes a violent one — for a retreat to a former status quo.

Often, negative reactions to progressive policy and curricula (particularly those involving gender and sexual identities) share a common theme of moral panic. Movements or identities that 'deviate' from the status quo are positioned as a threat to 'traditional' values or behaviour deemed socially 'acceptable' that typically centre the white, straight, able-bodied, affluent (or at least economically secure) male as both the 'norm' or default, at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy.

So-called 'threats' to that norm are sensationalized through fear-mongering tactics that often rely on othering, dehumanization, and disinformation. These tactics can also include assertions about (often inaccurately characterized or vaguely defined) individualized rights — such as "parental rights" (very prevalent in debates about education) or "freedom of speech".

The norm is often defined less by what it *is*, than by what it *is not*. For those who identify with that norm, and are, by default, at the top of the social hierarchy, efforts to expose how the hierarchy was constructed and maintained (through, for example, systemic racism, colonialism, and patriarchy) or suggestions that the norm should not, or may not, in fact, be "the norm," can be met with feelings of discomfort.

RESPECTING AN INDIVIDUAL'S RIGHT TO SELF-IDENTIFICATION

For the purpose of accommodating the diverse needs of students and staff in a school, an individual's self-identification is the sole measure of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

All individuals have the right to be addressed by their chosen name and to choose pronouns that align with their gender identity and/or gender expression. This is true whether or not the individual has obtained legal documentation of a change of name or gender designation* (e.g., Birth Certificate). Further verification of identity, such as medical records, is not required.

Some individuals may not feel included in the use of the pronouns "he" or "she" and may prefer alternate pronouns, such as "ze," "zir," "hir," "they" or "them," or might wish to express themselves or self-identify in other ways (e.g., Mx. instead or Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss, or no prefix at all).

Reflecting on discomfort: Understanding and acknowledging your own intersecting privilege(s) amongst those 'other' from your own.

Sitting with discomfort: Acknowledging that you may never truly understand someone else's lived experience(s) is part of sitting with discomfort.

Growing from discomfort: Hearing, supporting, and holding/leaving space for others' needs based on those experiences.

Left unexamined or unaddressed, this discomfort can turn into resentment and hatred.

Perhaps readers have seen this in the angry backlash to what's been referred to as "cancel culture" or "woke culture" (while pundits pontificate about "the pendulum swinging back"). However, rather than surrendering to the pattern of backlash, it might be more prudent to reflect on that discomfort, sit with it, and grow from it. But how? And what role can schools play in this growth?

First and foremost, it is important to recognize two things: 1) other groups and identities gaining rights and recognition does not mean that your own are in jeopardy; 2) facing consequences for any of those reactions that run the gamut from ridicule to physical violence is not oppression.

Schools play a large role in shaping young minds. Do we want those minds to be critical, open, and inclusive? And would we want our own children, niblings[2], or grandchildren to face barriers to success based on their identity and/or ability? If we answer no, is it okay for other people's kids to face barriers to success based on their identity or ability? Is it acceptable for a broader examination of hierarchy and identity

to be shut down as a result of the personal discomfort of those who have, traditionally, held positions of power?

Schools can be places where children learn, grow, and thrive — but they should be places where *every* child can learn, grow, and thrive regardless of their identity or ability. They should be spaces in which creativity, expression, and challenging norms and injustice are encouraged.

While schools have a long way to go to become fully equitable, safe, and inclusive, policies (such as Ontario's 2015 Health and Phys-ed Curriculum) that support school communities in identifying and decentring the default identity, and provide students with the tools to do this themselves in their daily lives are steps in the right direction. ◉

Dr. Codie Fortin Lalonde is a recent graduate of the PhD in Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies at Carleton University and is currently the acting Business Agent and Organizer for CUPE Local 4600 (representing Teaching Assistants and Contract Instructors at Carleton University). Her interests include public and higher education, critical discourse studies, policy, social justice, and the labour movement. You can follow her on Twitter @ girlwnohedges

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Notes

1 Here violence is meant broadly as intended or consequential harm — physical, psychological, symbolic or some combination thereof.

2 A gender neutral term for a sibling's children.

Anti-trans groups are targeting schools

Anti-trans groups are trying to ignite a culture war in schools. Here's what's at stake—and what we can do.

Fae Johnstone
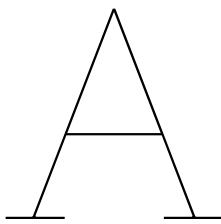
Across Ontario, we're seeing an organized push by anti-trans and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ groups to roll back essential protections and supports for 2SLGBTQIA+ — and, especially, trans-students. They're using tactics recycled from the anti-gay hysteria of the 1970s to 1990s, but this time around, trans people are in their crosshairs.

In the most recent school board election cycle, we saw an alarming number of anti-trans candidates popping up and organizing amongst themselves. Through a combination of misinformation and fear mongering, they were hoping to revitalize a culture war that will only jeopardize the well-being and safety of vulnerable students.

This is part of a broader, longer campaign. Under the guise of their new favorite buzz words 'gender ideology' (read: trans inclusion), these groups are trying to convince the public that there's a nefarious hidden agenda to recruit kids into a 'trans cult,' framing education about trans identities as 'grooming' and 'child abuse.' Sound familiar? It's an updated but no less abhorrent version of the homophobic 'gay teachers are trying to convert your children' line from the 1970s.

But it doesn't stop there. Even as we know many trans and gender-diverse kids are made homeless by family rejection, anti-trans groups and candidates are arguing for the removal of essential privacy protections that make sure trans and gender-diverse students aren't outed to potentially unsafe families, putting already vulnerable and stigmatized kids at risk of further violence.

While these groups share their false narratives of 'gender ideology' taking over our schools, trans and gender-diverse kids are

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ACCELERATE 2SLGBTQIA+ INCLUSION, EDUCATION AND PROTECTION IN OUR SCHOOLS?

Research your local candidates and see where they stand on 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion and human rights. Check for statements of support, mention of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, or commitments to inclusion on their websites.

Representation matters: Proud Politics Canada is a great resource to find out more about 2SLGBTQIA+ political candidates right across the country.

Advocacy happens between elections too—follow what your school board is doing to accelerate and expand efforts for 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion; stay informed and engaged.

Support your local 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations. When hate comes knocking, local queer organizations are on the frontlines pushing back and supporting our queer and trans kids most in need. Check out Enchante Network's membership list for local organizations you can donate to and support.

still struggling at school. A survey of Canadian students by Egale Canada found that 64% of students still hear homophobic comments daily or weekly at school, that 30% of 2SLGBTQ+ students have been victims of cyberbullying, and that 57% of trans students have been the target of mean rumours or lies. Our schools have undoubtedly come a long way in 20 years, but they're still not safe for the next generation of queer and trans kids.

On the positive side, it's important to recognize how far schools *have* come. Many schools and school boards are loud and proud champions of 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion. We had many incredible progressive and 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive candidates running for trustee in this election.

I'm cautiously optimistic that the majority of these anti-trans candidates didn't win their races. In spite of their Twitter echo chambers, online chat rooms and connections to far-right groups, on the doorstep and in the voting booth, Ontarians saw through anti-trans conspiracy theories.

Why? Because most parents understand that safer schools for 2SLGBTQIA+ students make for safer schools for all students. And most parents want their kids to learn how to be kind, respectful and accepting of people different from them.

But we can't be complacent. Our kids deserve champions of 2SLGBTQIA+ rights and inclusion elected to office, not conspiracy theorists and hatemongers. The recent school board and municipal elections are evidence that we must redouble our efforts on inclusion — not merely counter those spreading misinformation — because our school communities still aren't safe enough. ●

Fae Johnstone is the Executive Director of Wisdom2Action and one of Canada's loudest voices on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. Follow on twitter @faejohnstone and @Wisdom2action.

Through the smoke

SOGI advocacy for safe and inclusive Alberta school communties

Sarrah Johnstone

Many Alberta schools have references to safe and caring learning environments on their websites, but in reality, fail to provide programming, effective policies, and action to protect LGBTQ2S+ youth in schools. There is a tension between theory and practice, which largely stems from fear; fear of parent push back, fear of enrollment decline, and an underlying homophobia that is too socialized to even admit to. Perhaps even more than that, there is a fear of making a mistake.

The world's largest crisis prevention and suicide intervention organization for LGBTQ2S+ youth, asserts that youth who identify as non-binary, gay, lesbian, queer or transgender are at a significantly higher risk for depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality even before the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated that risk (Green et al., 2020). If ever there was a time to face fears, and look for a solution, it is now.

If you can't stand the heat, get out of the school

Kosciw et al. (2012) credit the existence of gender and sexuality alliances (known by the acronym GSA) with being the most impactful and protective measure schools can provide to students who identify with expansive gender identities and sexual orientations. However, once these inclusive clubs are generated by a student advocate, they require teacher support and resources to maintain the safe space they offer; in essence, the flame requires someone to tend to it so it does not go out. For this reason, it is imperative that programming be implemented alongside GSAs to support student advocates in all Alberta schools. Community support, resources and research, and access to legislation and legal rights are the next steps to maintaining safe and inclusive learning environments.

SOGI123

SOGI123, the primary program of ARC Foundation, is an initiative to make schools safer and more inclusive for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) in both British Columbia and Alberta. The numbers

correspond with the methods for implementation which are: 1: policies, 2: environments, 3: teaching (ARC Foundation, 2019b).

SOGI123 is not a curriculum but rather focuses on supporting networks of educators across Alberta to work collaboratively and creates publicly available SOGI-inclusive professional development and classroom resources with and for educators.

Much like Cooley's looking glass (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017), SOGI123 is committed to creating reflections of students of all identities in Canadian schools, but they cannot do it alone, just like one teacher and a GSA cannot maintain inclusive spaces in schools all on their own. The program asks schools to evaluate their practices and recognize that a "committee of experts cannot bring change. Change will come from a community of educators trying, learning, failing, and succeeding together" (ARC Foundation, 2019b).

Non-binary and transgender expression in schools is most easily accepted and honoured by other students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021). It is the adults, ranging from parents and teachers, to administrators and support staff or visitors, who appear to have the greatest challenge accepting genderqueer, gender fluid, and agender expressions from the children in their care. Again, it frequently comes down to fear. Ask adults over the age of 40 (who are not immersed in academic discussions or active learning) about gender expression and they will likely produce a deer in the headlights look and often more questions than answers. The range of terminology, meanings, and implications of not knowing what to say, can be overwhelming. It is important to note that this actually describes many of the teachers, administrators, and board members in Alberta schools beginning this work; supporting them with programming, learning, and community is not just necessary, it is negligent to ignore.

Choosing this program should be easy; "SOGI-inclusive policies and procedures save lives" (ARC Foundation, 2019a). Undoubtedly, marginalized students resulting from all forms of systemic oppression are vulnerable in Alberta schools. "Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently found that LGB[TQ2S+] youth have a higher

prevalence of depression, selfharm, suicidal ideation and attempts, and problematic substance use, compared to heterosexual youth" (Burk et al., 2018).

Given that this is a known reality, it is essential that Alberta educational leaders and teachers take action to protect students' lives. The time is now because there has never been more research, and more support accessible to teachers than today. Also, programs like SOGI123 offer step by step support in how to make positive changes to benefit inclusive SOGI practices. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) argues that victimization, bullying and hate crimes affect all children not just those who have "non-conforming gender identities and expressions. Creating school environments that respect and affirm gender diversity will empower all students rather than limit them" (ACLU, 2021, p.11).

The ACLU also argues in favour of organizations like SOGI123 that create school climates and culture that are not just gender inclusive but more accepting in general. Schools with active GSAs and programs such as SOGI123 to support the teachers and administrators in developing inclusive spaces "discourage children from expressing judgments about people based on factors like race, class, sexuality, gender, family structure, ethnicity and religion" (ACLU, 2021, p. 11).

The most important aspect of this kind of programming is not the reliance on outside support, but rather a community of educators within Alberta schools who know what questions to ask, what is legally required, who to reach out to for support, and embracing "failing forward" as part of the process.

The SOGI Scan

Based on SOGI123's guidelines, I recently conducted step two of the SOGI Scan. (A five-step starting point for SOGI123 schools.) It helps celebrate inclusive practices already working within the school, and also pinpoints ways that the school could improve. The scan includes an evaluation of policies, spaces, resources, and anonymous feedback from staff and students (ARC Foundation, 2019a).

Sadly, my scan yielded a failing grade. While some teachers have intentionally put up pride notices or included rainbow symbols or flags in their classrooms, the overall tone of the school is not yet inclusive, but focuses on binary gender expression. While Alberta schools, including my own, espouse inclusive and empowering beliefs, the policies do not align

The world's largest crisis prevention and suicide intervention organization for LGBTQ2S+ youth, asserts that youth who identify as non-binary, gay, lesbian, queer or transgender are at a significantly higher risk for depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality even before the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated that risk.

Given that this is a known reality, it is essential that Alberta educational leaders and teachers take action to protect students' lives. The time is now because there has never been more research, and more support accessible to teachers than today.

with practice, training, programming and resources, or overall student experiences.

Programming such as SOGI123 is essential to align teaching professionals with student advocates such as those in GSAs who are the student developers of safe spaces. However, these student advocates need adult support through programming, not just to keep GSAs running, but to prevent widespread instances of bullying and marginalization of gender diverse youth which contributes to a school's overall academic achievement, absenteeism, and student retention.

If student wellness and safety does not pique the interest of administrators in Alberta, perhaps the bottom line will.

Embers of equity:
benefits for the entire school community

School programming like SOGI123 has the ability to benefit the entire learning community. In essence, the programming helps to create safe spaces for LGBTQ2S+ youth, but it also serves as a way for adults to learn how to support students with GSAs, and demonstrate bravery by allies in the classroom. Student advocacy through GSAs and other forums can only go so far; adult support is seen as the most important intervention, and sorely needed.

If indeed, the number of supportive adult allies in school settings increase self-esteem, grade point averages, reduces absenteeism, and limits marginalization and negative treatment of Alberta's youth (Kosciw et al., 2012), what is it that administrators and school boards in Alberta are waiting for, and how is it possible that programming like SOGI123 is not in each Alberta school already? The answer is complex; though it might make sense to say it is all smoke and mirrors (given the earlier reference to both). It is perhaps better said that it is steeped in fear of parental mobilization against schools, funding models based on enrollment, and historical oppression that teaches the practice of exclusion.

Fanning the flames

Groups like Alberta's Parents for Choice in Education, known as PCE, aggressively target teachers, administrators and the government through media outlets and private briefs such as their opposition statement regarding Alberta's Bill 10 from 2015. While this is a long

time ago now, the pushback is consistent with the climate in education today. In the 2015 policy paper, the authors preferred to remain anonymous citing that they did not want their identities or beliefs to come into question rather than considering the "facts" of their message (2015), and they begin their paper by stating that the parent group is not opposed to, or in favour of, Bill 10 (Parents for Choice in Education, 2015, p.2). Yet one short paragraph later they contradict their own statement of objectivity and argue that PCE opposes Bill 10 because it:

> puts students in charge of school clubs; imposes ideological clubs on all Alberta schools; does not require parental consent or parental knowledge; disrespects the importance of a school's culture…was passed without any real debate about the nature of GSAs; is not based on credible research; was passed without consulting parents and other stakeholders; undermines parental rights in education; attacks choice in education; threatens the diversity of Alberta's schools, and undermines the fundamental Charter freedoms of citizens. (2015, p.2)

All fired up: it's the law

In 2016 a set of recommendations regarding best practices for creating respectful learning spaces was published by the Government of Alberta; it includes guidelines for Alberta teachers, administrations, and governing bodies outlining the inclusion and treatment of all students, including those who express diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The intention behind it is to limit transphobia and imposed standards of heteronormative binary expressions and identities. The Alberta government, or at least the one that was elected when the document was released, agrees that gender diversity and human rights of all Alberta students must be protected and supported. In fact, they insist that "the rights and needs of students with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions are respected and inform decision-making" (Government of Alberta, 2016, p. 3). This directive from the provincial governing body to consider students with expansive gender expressions and sexual orientations when making decisions at the school level is of particular interest when contemplating the implementation of programming like SOGI123. In no uncertain terms, the Alberta guidelines express the necessity of making change in schools to unwaveringly support inclusive spaces and create necessary

Student advocates need adult support through programming, not just to keep GSAs running, but to prevent widespread instances of bullying and marginalization of gender diverse youth which contributes to a school's overall academic achievement, absenteeism, and student retention.

change for LGBTQ2S+ students and their families, and teaching professionals; in fact, it is the law and must be at the forefront of school planning and decision-making.

Let sparks fly

On the British Columbia provincial website there is a powerful statement that everyone has a sexual orientation and gender identity and that it is not unique to LGBTQ2S+ people. "It's an inclusive term that applies to everyone, whether they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, heterosexual or cisgender (identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth)" (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

This message from Alberta's provincial neighbour is essential to changing the narrative in schools, and so too is providing resources such as The Trevor Project (2021), Alberta GSA Network (n.d.) and Gender Spectrum Organization (2019) that offer support to youth advocates and safe spaces to withstand the soot and smoke that is part of the current climate of education in Alberta. While there are certainly unintentional microaggressions of well-meaning teachers and educational leaders, programming and effective policies are still needed in Alberta schools to support students who advocate for the validation and support that *everyone* deserves. ◦

*Since the time of writing this article, the author's school has undertaken work with SOGI123 and aligned with a cohort of other schools beginning its implementation in Alberta; a small step forward.

Sarrah Johnstone has been an Alberta middle school humanities teacher for nearly 15 years. She is two courses away from completing a Master's of Education degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with concentrations in diversity, equity, and inclusion topics, and heart-led leadership. She is an active member of her school's SOGI education network, GSA, student services and leadership teams.

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Snapshot from Saskatchewan

Public vs. private battle brewing in education

Gregory Beatty

Speaking in tongues. Corporal punishment so violent that students were left bruised and limping for days. Grown adults swarming a 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in their home to conduct an exorcism. The allegations leveled against a private Christian school in Saskatoon by 18 former students in early August were shocking.

The school, Legacy Christian Academy, is one of 25 private independent schools in Saskatchewan that receive public funding—in Legacy Christian's case, $700,000 a year. The number of former students alleging abuse has since grown to over 50, with a sustained pattern of physical, psychological and sexual abuse from the early 2000s to present day. The students have launched a $25 million class action lawsuit, and a police investigation is underway.

Sounds horrific, right? Yet when the school year started in September, Legacy Christian's doors were open. After days of pressure from the students, NDP Opposition and others, the Saskatchewan Party government did finally agree to appoint a supervisor for Legacy Christian and two other Christian schools implicated in the allegations. But it has refused calls to pause the school's funding until the police investigation is complete.

The Legacy Christian scandal shone an unwelcome spotlight, for the provincial government anyway, on the state of public versus private education in Saskatchewan. And make no mistake, there's a political dimension to it. So it's worth putting the scandal in a broader context.

Rewriting the funding formula

After health care, education is the second biggest budget item for Canada's provincial governments. In Saskatchewan, both are in crisis. For some time the student population in Saskatchewan, fueled by an influx of young immigrant families, has been surging. Concurrently, the challenges children face, whether due to intergenerational trauma, cultural dislocation or special needs, have been growing. But the provincial government has been stubbornly tightfisted in funding public education.

It started with a $55 million cut in an infamous 2017–18 austerity budget (as noted by Shawn Davidson, Saskatchewan School Boards Association executive director), and funding has never recovered. It's especially galling because in 2009 the government restricted SSBA members from collecting their own education revenue through municipal levies as they had long done. "When that happened,

the government accepted a responsibility to adequately fund public education," said Davidson. "For the first few years, they took that duty seriously. But that all changed in 2017–18, and since then we've been facing a lot of challenges."

While the provincial government is Scrooge McDucking the public school system, the March 2022 budget increased private school funding by $2.6 million to $17.6 million. The government also committed to a new private school funding formula, moving from 50 to 80% of the public school per-student average to a flat 75% for all private schools. This represented a small hit for some schools, but a significant increase for many others.

Social engineering

There were further allegations that students were sometimes pulled from class to campaign for local politicians who were in Legacy Christian's "good book."[1] That's in direct contravention of Legacy Christian's charitable status with Canada Revenue Agency which prohibits partisan political activity. But the implications of this alliance go well beyond stumping for anointed candidates in elections. As we've seen with the Republican Party in the United States, evangelical Christians are a dominant force in modern conservatism. So perhaps the provincial government sees Legacy Christian (and other publicly-funded Christian schools in Saskatchewan) as natural allies.

Commenting on the provincial government's education policy direction in a recent media interview, Director of the CCPA Saskatchewan office Simon Enoch said "Conservatives have been hostile to public education almost since its inception. They have a longstanding idea that public schools are engaged in social engineering."

There are two components to that. For Christian schools, it's about creating a bubble to keep kids from being exposed to information, values and beliefs that clash with fundamentalist Christian doctrine. And for conservatives in general, there's a fierce desire to push back against curricula and school practices regarded as being too liberal or "woke".

While the fight has been especially intense south of the border, it has started to rear its head in Canada through Christian/conservative-backed candidates in school board elections, growing support for "parental choice" and private school options, and meddling with curricula. When Alberta's United Conservative Party was elected in 2019, it scrapped the previous NDP government's curriculum review and started its own. Several controversial consultants from the U.S. were recruited to participate, and the curriculum that was ultimately produced has been heavily criticized for being biased toward Christian European history, values and beliefs and dismissive of other cultures and perspectives.

Climate crisis

Another "burning" issue for provincial governments in Alberta and Saskatchewan is climate change. Both governments are notoriously combative about taking meaningful steps to phase out fossil fuels to address climate change and help Canada reduce its sky-high per capita GHG emissions. There, they have an ally in the fossil fuel industry, which also has a presence in provincial classrooms.

University of Regina researcher Emily Eaton recently completed a study into fossil fuel influence in public education for the Corporate Mapping Project. When interviewing teachers on how they taught climate change to their students, she found that when teachers live in a fossil fuel community, there's the initial pressure of knowing family, friends and neighbours may be financially (and emotionally) invested in the industry.

"There are also lots of fossil fuel-funded social media campaigns like Oil Respect and Canada's Energy Citizens that try to foster a 'grassroots' identification with the industry," says Eaton. "So a lot of teachers feel uncomfortable navigating that space because they feel that anything that is perceived as being critical of the industry will be seen as an attack on the community."

Then there are the school materials. "At the provincial level there are ministry recommended learning resources," says Eaton. "We interviewed someone at that level, and they said that because a lot of [government] resources are Ontario-based they do rely on industry to provide local content. The Saskatchewan Mining Association, for instance, is very active in curriculum development."

Since the days of outright climate change denial are probably over, the fossil fuel industry's main goal now, says Eaton, is to frame the issue in their favour. "One message they like to deliver is that while the industry does have environmental risks, it's doing everything it can to mitigate them. So let us show you the good work we're doing to recycle water and lower our emissions."

Commitments to be net-zero by 2050 are a prime example. In a pull-quote or sound-bite

it's perhaps appealing, albeit mostly dependent on speculative technologies that have yet to be proven at scale. But since this commitment only covers the *production* of fossil fuels and ignores emissions generated when the fuel is actually burned (which is 80% of total emissions today) the reality is far less impressive than a sound-bite would suggest.

"They also talk about how the regulatory system is so onerous, where they have to submit all kinds of paperwork on how many species are on the land they want to drill on," says Eaton. "So they play up the idea that many politicians have spoken to — that Canada's regulations are robust, therefore our industry is more environmentally friendly than other countries. But that's not true, because Canadian oil, especially heavy oil in Saskatchewan and bitumen in Alberta, is very emissions intensive."

The industry is also keen to frame climate change as a matter of individual action for students, says Eaton. "'We recognize there's an issue, they'll say, and we encourage individuals to evaluate their fossil fuel use.' Then they'll roll out some tips like converting to LED lights and driving your car less. It's a way for them to say, 'It's not our fault, we're just responding to consumer demand.' That insulates them from having any culpability."

Fragmented realities

As the convoy protests showed last February, strong (and growing) ties exist between Trump-style Republicans in the U.S. and Canada's populist Christian/conservative movement. So it's definitely instructive to watch developments down south, which are increasingly disturbing.

"Lately, education seems to have become much more of a flashpoint," says Simon Enoch. "Things like school choice, vouchers, independent schools, attacking teachers, banning books, fights over curriculum, they are all ways for conservatives to exert control over a public system that they believe is propagandizing their children."

Meanwhile, according to 2019 statistics from the National Center for Science Education, only two-thirds of U.S. biology teachers taught evolution in their classroom. That was up from 50% in 2007.

"That's where I think conservatives win in undermining the public school curriculum, by creating so much controversy that even something like evolution, which is considered pretty settled science, is off-limits," says Enoch. "But the consequence of that is that a basic scientific principle is not being communicated to students."

Enoch is interested to see if the Legacy Christian scandal has any impact on the Saskatchewan government's commitment to private education. "With the measures in the last budget, the government was really betting on the idea of expanding independent schools," he says. "So this scandal came at the absolute worst time. It shows how little regulation and oversight there is of independent schools and the people who teach in them."

But will it deter the government? Enoch is doubtful. "I think for the government's base, and activists in the [Sask Party] who want more school choice, they won't want the government to change course on promoting independent schools as an alternative to the public system."

The provincial government's default defense against criticism of its education policy is "parental choice". They fell back on it again on November 3 when yet more allegations were leveled by former students that Legacy Christian taught a controversial Bible-friendly curriculum which, among other gems, teaches children that humans and dinosaurs coexisted.

Obviously, parents have a vested interest in their children's education. But what about broader society? Surely we all have a stake in how our society's children and youth are educated.

"That's the whole point of having a provincial curriculum," says Eaton. "I think it's important that students get a base level of knowledge, but the problem we're seeing with the rise of right-wing populism is these echo chambers of misinformation. Certainly, a base understanding of climate science isn't going to mean every student will become a climate activist. But they should have some sense of the global scientific consensus on climate change. What they do with that is a different issue, but I don't think society is well-served by having these increasingly fragmented 'realities.'" ◉

Gregory Beatty is a Regina-based freelance writer who is a frequent contributor to two independent Saskatchewan publications: *Prairie Dog* magazine in Regina and *Planet S* in Saskatoon. This is his first contribution to *Our Schools/Our Selves*.
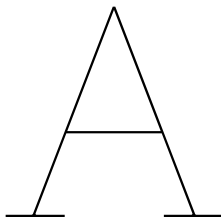
Notes

1 Named politicians include a former Conservative MP who was a notorious opponent of abortion rights and same sex marriage, a former conservative leaning Saskatoon mayor, and a current city councilor.

Keeping *whose* faith?

Religion and Alberta's social studies curriculum

Margie Patrick

All curriculum tells a story, or stories. Social studies engages with the narratives of nation-building and what it means to be Canadian, the nature of a "good" citizen, and whose stories are told. Every time a curriculum is renewed, the writers make choices about which stories to tell and how to tell them.

Curriculum creation is a loaded process, as evidenced in Alberta's ongoing debate over a new social studies curriculum. When the former NDP government released its proposed K-12 scope and sequence for all subjects in 2017 and a K-4 draft curriculum in 2018, Jason Kenney, then leader of the opposition United Conservative Party (UCP), criticized what he termed a politically correct curriculum with its focus on oppression and climate change and absence of military history.

Once elected in April 2019, the UCP government set about writing new K-6 drafts between August 2020 and February 2021, advised by 19 Indigenous elders and subject matter experts. Released on March 29, 2021, the new drafts generated a firestorm of responses, prompting the Association of Alberta Deans of Education to support the creation of a non-partisan website called Alberta Curriculum Analysis to collect and publish academic analysis of the subject drafts. A Facebook group called Albertans Reject Curriculum Draft was established and at the time of writing had 40,000 members. The social studies draft was widely panned as too content-heavy, often age-inappropriate, and Eurocentric with an embedded Christian bias. Further, it did not include any study of residential schools until grade 5.

Religion in the social studies draft curriculum

While public opposition to the entire scope of the social studies curriculum was extensive, my focus here is on its inclusion of religion. (That religion is included in the social studies curriculum may not surprise those who view Alberta as Canada's "Bible belt.") Before proceeding, it is important to state that I was on the social studies working group during the NDP-led curriculum renewal process and in 2019 I wrote an article titled "Understanding citizenship and conflict: Why Alberta's new social studies curriculum can't forget about religion" for a professional journal published by the Social Studies Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Both the inclusion of religion in the draft curriculum and the manner in which it was

included were strongly contested. Although the original social studies fact sheet highlighted student learning about belief systems in every grade, it was most prominent in grades 2 and 6. Students in grade 2 were to study "belief systems associated with Islam, Judaism, and Christianity and how they helped to shape the current world" (p. 2) within a larger study of how ancient civilizations "have contributed to our heritage and traditions." Students in grade 6 were to "investigate Alberta's and Canada's ethnic and religious diversity" by studying the beliefs of several religions in more depth than in grade 2.

The assumptions embedded in the draft were evident almost immediately: the first knowledge outcome for the grade 6 section on religious diversity read "The religious affiliation of most Albertans is Christian, and the largest denominations are Roman Catholic, United, Anglican, Lutheran, and Baptist churches. There is growing ethnic and religious diversity in the population." The corresponding Understanding indicator read "Freedom of religious practice is encouraged, but acceptance comes less easily—*in part, because newcomers bring new and unfamiliar religious faiths and practices*."

Within 24 hours the Ministry quietly changed the language (presumably in response to public furor over the original wording) to "Freedom of religious practices is encouraged but *we sadly know from history that* acceptance can come less easily—in part, because newcomers bring new and unfamiliar religious faiths and practices. *But fear of the unknown can be no excuse for intolerance. Students will specifically study other faith traditions so that unfamiliar practices become respected and understood in a pluralist society.*"

The change did not go far enough in addressing the problems. Below I identify three ways in which the March 2021 draft was inadequate and harmful. Although I believe that some education *about* religion is helpful and necessary to promote deeper engagement with both citizenship and multiculturalism, the manner in which religion was included in the draft ignored Albertan demographics and history. As a result, much of the public debate focused on the specifics of

how religion was included rather than on the larger question of whether educated citizens in pluralist societies require some basic knowledge of both religious and non-religious worldviews present in their communities.

Misrepresenting Alberta's religious demographics

The assumptions embedded throughout the draft curriculum (even with the hasty revision) reveal the degree to which its writers were wedded to a certain vision/version of religious demographics in Alberta — currently, and historically. Since a FOIP request revealed Cabinet participation in the curriculum writing process, including by the Premier at the time, one can assume that the drafts also reflected how Cabinet viewed the province.

Is Alberta Canada's "Bible Belt?" It's not so clear.

Some argue that Albertans are not more religious or socially conservative than other Canadians, although parties on the right do at times express sympathy with the "moral traditionalists." At the same time, research suggests that the more important religion is to a person, the more likely they are to vote UCP. One explanation is the blurring of religious and rural identities. A 2018 poll found that Albertans living in rural areas do not self-identify as being significantly more conservative than their urban counterparts. Instead, party affiliation is largely based on rural identity.

"Religious nones" do not see themselves in the curriculum

In the 2021 census a national average of 34.6% of Canadians self-identified as religiously unaffiliated or having a secular perspective. That number was 40.1% in Alberta, behind only the Yukon and BC. Those reporting a Christian affiliation was 48.1%. According to one author writing in *albertaviews*, relatively high numbers of Albertans have reported no religious affiliation since the 1930s, second only to British Columbia. The Alberta Humanist Association said the curriculum draft indicated a lack of appreciation for diversity, differentiation, and the non-religious. It is important to recognize that the religious nones, as with all groups, are internally heterogeneous. For example, some are secular, some are agnostic, and others are spiritual but not religious.

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Some of the "unfamiliar religious faiths and practices" have been in Alberta for over a century

For example, Lebanese Muslims first settled in Lac La Biche in 1906. In 1958 the community erected the second mosque in Canada, following the Al-Rashid mosque constructed in Edmonton in 1938 by the dozen families who had congregated in the city by 1930. The history of Sikhs in Alberta indicates that those who lived in the province in the early 1900s "wore western attire" in order to gain employment. According to the religious studies scholar researching the history, "Sikhs helped to build Alberta." The Hindu Society of Alberta is 50 years old, with planning for the organization begun in 1967.

Assumptions baked into the curriculum are rooted in Christian privilege

Christianity has been and continues to be the dominant religion in Canada according to census information, although the data typically does not include active participation, which occurs at lower rates. At the same time, as Stephanie Knowler's master's thesis points out, Canada is a secular, multicultural, and religiously diverse country. Knowler's interviews with Albertan school administrators, teachers, parents, and students identified the many ways in which schools continue to privilege Christianity.

The inclusion of Indigenous spirituality in the draft is paltry

In grade 1, students would learn about some Indigenous creation stories and that "First Nations and Inuit spirituality can include balance with nature, spirit world, earth, and sky."

Omissions of Indigenous history generally led Métis scholar Yvonne Poitras Pratt to tell City News that the draft "relegates Indigenous peoples to bit players in the celebratory history of European migration to North America."

Omissions of Indigenous history generally led Métis scholar Yvonne Poitras Pratt to tell City News that the draft "relegates Indigenous peoples to bit players in the celebratory history of European migration to North America." Although there is just as much religious diversity within Indigenous communities as most other communities, the absence of Indigenous spirituality in the draft curriculum tells students that it is not important.

Bias in the presentation of "facts"

When pundits and parents alike examined the grade 6 section on religion, they noted how language elevated some religious beliefs above others. For example, in the identification of Christian teachings, one statement read "Jesus Christ is Son of God," whereas under Buddhism the teaching read "…is based on the teachings of called [sic] the Buddha, whom *Buddhists believe* was born Siddhārtha Gautama…" (emphasis added). Similarly, the second knowledge outcome for Hinduism began with "Hindus believe in a supreme all-encompassing being called Brahman." Stating one principle in the declarative and others in a more interrogative voice suggests one is true and the others are more questionable or open to interpretation.

Others pointed out how the inclusion of "Old Testament" in the Judaism section revealed a Christian bias. Christians distinguish between the Old and New Testaments, which together make up the Christian Bible. Jews do not refer to their scriptures as the Old Testament because they do not assume a New Testament. Instead, they refer to their scriptures as the Hebrew Scriptures or Tanakh, comprised of the law, the prophets, and the writings. Furthermore, the Christian Old Testament and the Jewish Tanakh order the books differently.

Religion defined exclusively by beliefs

There are many ways to discuss religion. For instance, one could focus on the beliefs of different religious traditions and/or how a religion functions in a society and/or how religion is lived at the level of everyday life. Given the focus of the entire curriculum draft on "rich knowledge," it is not surprising that the curriculum writers chose to focus on beliefs. Such an approach, however, separates religion from "real life" and relegates it to "the head" at the expense of "heart and hands" learning. Exclusive attention to beliefs, which can never be completely ignored, delines religious and faith-based traditions that are more practice- and communal-oriented.

The aftermath

In December 2021, Alberta's Minister of Education Adriana LaGrange announced a staggered implementation schedule and a revamp of social studies based on a new "blueprint" that reorganized some of the material to be more age-appropriate and added some content, including adding some learning about residential schools to grade 4. The Alberta Education website promised that public input on the blueprint would inform a new draft. The Public Feedback Survey Report was released in

Questions about religion remain as the Ministry revamps the social studies curriculum. First, how will the non-religious be included in the curriculum? More specifically, the curriculum must reflect Alberta's actual past and present religious demographics rather than some imagined past.

March 2022: social studies received the greatest response by far. While the responses suggested there is public support for students learning about religion, there appeared to be even more who felt the manner in which religion was included was problematic.

Questions about religion remain as the Ministry revamps the social studies curriculum. First, how will the non-religious be included in the curriculum? More specifically, the curriculum must reflect Alberta's actual past and present religious demographics rather than some imagined past.

Second, how will religion and non-religion be portrayed in contemporary Canadian society? Studying religion as a "foundation of modern civilization" presents religion historically but it is also important for the present, to understand Canadian society, multiculturalism, and some conflicts arising from religious pluralism. Conflict is not necessarily bad as it can prompt social change. Pretending that religious pluralism does not challenge some existing policies and practices is naïve. At the same time, focusing exclusively on difference is unhelpful as there are many accounts of Canadians working out differences amongst themselves in their lived realities.

Third, how will the Ministry include educators in the development of curriculum and support them in the implementation? Various studies describe how many teachers are afraid of teaching about religion because they are afraid of not knowing enough and consequently offending students and parents. The public debate thus far has revealed strong feelings and beliefs regarding education about religion. Clearly more stakeholder voices are needed in the development of curriculum.

Finally, what story does the Ministry want the curriculum to tell about religion and non-religion? At the moment, the story portrays religion almost exclusively as beliefs. In contrast, many Albertans stated in online discussions that they would be more comfortable with students learning how religions, secularism, and spiritualities have impacted Canadian and Albertan societies, how they have prompted Canadians to work together at times and built walls between them — usually with terrible consequences — at other times. This is complex storytelling, and perhaps requires fewer listed outcomes with more curriculum space available for teachers to teach and learn about the local stories that resonate most closely with their students, and speak to their lived realities.

Conclusion

Teaching about religion in public education is fraught with emotions and tensions. Yet the debates in Alberta also demonstrate the power and strength of citizen engagement. Parents, educators, and all those who care about education came together to demand a curriculum that acknowledges the diverse communities who live in Alberta and tells a larger story of religion in Alberta both past and present. Religious diversity, including the non-religious, is an aspect of multiculturalism. To not include such diversity in a curriculum is to ignore an important, albeit challenging, feature of Canadian society and history. ⊙

Margie Patrick taught high school social studies before obtaining a PhD in Religious Studies. Now teaching in the faculty of education at The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta, Margie researches the intersections of religion and public education in Canada.

Making fact-checking a habit with "Break the Fake"

Matthew Johnson

Our media world has changed immeasurably over the past few decades. Today anyone can create and spread fake images, videos, or social media accounts, and any of us may share bad information with our family and friends. Not only do we need new tools for verifying what we see online, our old media literacy tools may sometimes lead us astray. A single glance is enough to see the difference between the *New York Times* and the *National Enquirer*, but every tweet, TikTok video or Google search result looks the same.

While critically engaging with media is as important now as it was when media literacy was first introduced to the curriculum in the 1980s, to keep from being overwhelmed we need to first find out whether a source is *worth* our critical attention.

To fix this, we need not only to teach young Canadians how to verify what they see online but to get them into the habit of doing it. Like buckling a seat belt, to become a habit something has to be quick and easy enough to do it every time. That's why each of the four steps in MediaSmarts' "Break the Fake" program can usually be done in less than a minute, and most of the time we'll get our answer by doing just one:

- Use fact-checking tools
- Consult other sources
- Find the original source
- Verify the source

The easiest way to verify information is to see if a fact-checking site has already done it for you. But we can also cast a wider net to find out the context and consensus: do reliable sources agree that something really happened, and do they mostly report the same facts? Does what you've seen fit with the consensus of experts in the field?

Instead of judging something based on who shared it, we need to find the original source. If it isn't one we recognize as being reliable, a search engine or Wikipedia will help us verify it. Does it have a track record of confirming

information and correcting mistakes? Does an expert have credentials in the right field?

The goal of the Break the Fake program is not just to teach students to debunk misinformation but to find out what *is* true online. Rather than being overly credulous, many youth are cynical about reliable and unreliable sources alike. Many young people feel unable to use the technology they've grown up with to find information, or else skip verifying altogether and hope for the best — leaving them easy prey for scams, conspiracy theories and industry "astroturfing" campaigns.

Misinformation is a big problem, but it is one we can solve. By taking a few quick, easy steps to verify what we see online — and making a habit of doing it every time we're about to share or act on something — we can all help to break the fake. ◉

Matthew Johnson is Director of Education at MediaSmarts, Canada's centre for digital media literacy. He has consulted on curriculum for several provinces and served on expert boards and panels for organizations including the Canadian Pediatric Society, the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario and the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada. He can be found on Twitter at @irregularverbal. For more information about MediaSmarts and their programs including Break the Fake, please visit www.mediasmarts.ca.

Use, Understand & Create
A DIGITAL LITERACY FRAMEWORK FOR CANADIAN SCHOOLS

Digital Literacy Training Program for Canadian Educators

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MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit centre for digital and media literacy.

Our vision is that children and youth have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens.

Media Smarts

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Kids learn new technologies effortlessly, multi-tasking through a complex mix of sound, graphics, text and images.

They have become managers, creators and distributors of information.

© MediaSmarts

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Many students feel that when they come into school they have to 'power down' to fit into an environment that offers fewer options for learning than are available in the life they live outside of the school.

This can erode students' perceptions of the relevance of education as they experience it in many schools today.

What If: Technology in the 21st Century Classroom
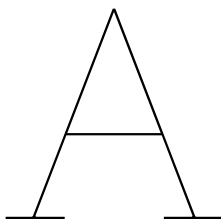
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"Yes, I remember it well"

Collective memory, comfortable narratives and Canadian whiteness

Mark T. S. Currie

....the national imaginary of the 'real' Canada — Canada as the great white north — lies beyond the nation's largest cities in the countryside and small towns (also overwhelmingly white).
—*Peake & Ray, 2001, p. 180*

As part of my work teaching in an Ontario Teacher Education program, specifically courses on intermediate- and senior-level History teaching methods, I explain to teacher candidates that I underpin my approaches to education with antiracism. Engaging in antiracism through History education includes but goes beyond recognizing the racism of the past and how it shaped and shapes the racist and antiracist societies of the present. I highlight to teacher candidates that because, as members of society, they exist in relation to the past, "doing" history through an antiracist lens means they need to start with an examination of themselves and their own assumptions.

When I taught about histories of racism in Canada, three key observations emerged.

1. While white teacher candidates were not apathetic about racism and antiracism, several of them remembered and perceived their home communities as "small, predominantly white towns," devoid of Black, Indigenous or racialized identities and, therefore, disconnected from racism.

2. These teacher candidates were, largely, unaware that every community in Canada, including their own, is situated on traditional First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit territory.

3. They were, also, unaware that the normalization of the Whiteness that they took for granted is itself the product of histories of colonialism and racist exclusion.

These observations are examples of how racist exclusions become normalized — disconnected from history, time and space. But the teacher candidates' assumptions also provided a tangible example of how their lived experience obscured to them how racism is complex and systemic — not always individual acts of violence. A (perceived) lack of diversity within a community, as shown by the teacher candidates, does not equate to a lack of racism. Yet, small-town communities pepper the Canadian

landscape, and their configurations of racism are currently under-addressed.

Curious, I decided to go beyond the classroom and to investigate some small-town communities with predominantly white populations, similar to those that some of the teacher candidates claimed as their hometowns. I wanted to better understand how social memory and discourse work in relation to racism and/or antiracism in places where "there's nobody to be racist against," as I've heard from people several times.

This investigation became part of my wider body of research. Specifically examining small-town communities, I looked at whether community members remember and/or see racism occurring in their towns; if they see their towns as an antiracist communities; and how Whiteness is maintained or disrupted in the memories and perceptions of the towns. With better understanding of how social memory and discourse work to (re)shape visions of whose presence is the *norm* and whose requires explanation, perhaps we can develop approaches to history education that disrupts the certainty around white people being "founders" and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) being *new* or *outsiders*.

By 'discourse', I mean the language and words we exchange, sure, but I also mean the so-called official images and symbols and names that surround us in banal ways but that communicate meanings about the spaces we occupy. The names of streets and parks, the structures of roads and buildings, and even where trees and vegetables can be planted act as cultural markers, establishing and reinforcing dominance and marginalization. The systems of power control and work through our everyday spaces, stemming from histories of large-scale colonization and exclusion of Indigenous and racialized people.

This was illustrated when, in the course of my research, I asked one participant to describe their small, southwestern Ontario town. They stated:

> [It's a] rural, agricultural community. European roots, with a lot of post-WWII immigration. Hungary, Polish, German communities with various other ones mixed in. When the European communities came, they brought their own culture with them, and they built the community halls […] really a United Nations here in the [19]50s and 60s.

The participant's statement showed a perception of community history — not to mention equating Europe with the UN — that they thought to be quite worldly but that actually ignores and excludes a great number of countries and nations where people are predominantly not and do not appear to be of European origins (white). Now, it's certainly possible that the participant didn't mean it this way; that it was just a casual attempt at presenting community members as having a variety of backgrounds, or even a slip of the tongue.

However, after the interview, walking around the town on my own, I was struck by the collection of flags outside the local high school representing some of North America (Canada, Ontario, United States), some of Europe (Germany, Hungary, Britain, Ukraine, Netherlands), and the United Nations. Much like the participant's description, the flags reify an understanding of the community and its population as being linked to Europe (and, as such, representative of the United Nations). To the people who are of European origins and align with this understanding of the community, the perception of the town's history and the flying of particular flags appears as normal — *just the way it is*. This perpetuated meaning, though, makes no acknowledgement of the land being traditional Indigenous territory or of the people of colour and non-European origins who have histories of sharing the community space for just as long as, if not longer than, the people who just *fit in*.

The participant's comments and the flags work together as only a small example, but they portray how banal, everyday discourse — the little things — articulate each other over and over, building to create dominant meanings (and, conversely, racist exclusions). It also highlights opportunities where system leaders and practitioners (e.g., educators, politicians, community organizers) can help educate people on critically reading their everyday surroundings and the assumptions both reinforced by and derived from them.

The historical memories generated by the cultural landscapes that people move through every day can mark people of European origins as naturally belonging, while rendering others as either interlopers who do not belong, or as newcomers whose presence needs explanation. This process takes place without reference to people's actual histories in a particular area, thereby eroding and excluding the historic and cultural presence of people who do not identify as white. It also points to potential linkages between collective remembering and racism, which can also identify avenues for successful historically-informed antiracism education. ◉

Mark T. S. Currie, PhD is a SSHRC Post-Doctoral Fellow, teaching in the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies at. Carleton University

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Fighting mis/disinformation through the public school system

Information environments as a social determinant of health

Rishika Wadehra
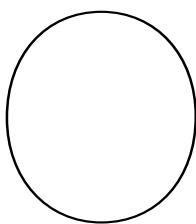
ver the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become clearer than ever that misinformation and disinformation is a public health issue. Communication of public health information is an essential part of keeping individuals and communities safe and healthy. Unfortunately, evidence shows that access to accurate, trustworthy health information to guide critical decision-making is inequitable and has contributed to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racialized, low-income, and other marginalized populations.

Increasingly, there have been calls to recognize the information environment or "infosphere," which refers to mediated and interpersonal communication channels, formal and informal communication networks, and information and communication technologies that enable individuals to engage with health information, as a social determinant of health. Other determinants, including employment, education, poverty, housing conditions, and race and ethnicity, also contribute to differential access and one's capacity to process, understand, and act on public health messaging.

The disparities in COVID-19 vaccine uptake across racial and low-income groups are a key example of how poor information environments can lead to vaccine hesitancy and mistrust in public health communication. For many vulnerable groups, especially Black and racialized communities, exclusionary and traumatic experiences with health care systems, government agencies, and law enforcement lead to institutional distrust.

Institutional distrust refers to an individual or group's lack of confidence in public institutions and systems in representing and delivering on their needs and priorities. Early in the pandemic, public health guidelines across Canada focused heavily on social distancing, masking, and staying at home to avoid COVID-19 transmission. However, those living with poorer social determinants — such as overcrowded housing conditions and precarious work — were unable to abide by these regulations and found themselves at considerably higher risk of serious illness.

Consideration of the social determinants of health and the consultation with marginalized groups to form policy responses to public health issues is necessary to build community trust and decrease the spread of mis/disinformation among vulnerable populations.

A growing 'parental rights' movement

Early in the pandemic, there developed a widespread narrative that children were generally immune from severe COVID-19 infections. Research has proven that to be inaccurate, showing that children and youth are in fact susceptible to the virus and that those with co-morbidities are especially vulnerable to severe outcomes, including long COVID. This is deeply concerning, as vaccine uptake for children remains worryingly low.

While anti-vaccine sentiment is not new — especially parental hesitancy around childhood vaccination — the spread of mis/disinformation from the far-right has contributed to the politicization of vaccines and threatens to heighten COVID-19 risk among children and youth.

Mis/disinformation is not only limited to vaccines and COVID-19 public health measures. In the municipal elections this past fall, advocacy groups raised concerns about a slate of far-right, anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-equity candidates running for school trustee positions across Canada, openly and proudly spreading transphobic rhetoric during the municipal election campaign period.

Although largely unsuccessful, with only a handful of these candidates elected to school boards in Ontario and elsewhere, it brought renewed attention to a widespread and fairly organized group of people who believe that parents should be able to dictate what their children learn in schools.

In 2021, there was a highly publicized debate over the merits of teaching critical race theory in public schools in the United States. Soon after, arguments against teaching critical race theory began in Canada as well, with school boards being questioned about their anti-racism curriculum and policies.

For many, critical race theory has now come to mean any sort of teachings on racial injustice, with some parents not wanting their children to explore race and racialization and learn lessons about how our laws and institutional and public policies enable racial inequities and discrimination. This also extends to other curriculum that centres social justice and equity, including LGBTQIA2S+ inclusive health and sex education.

The role of schools in addressing mis/disinformation

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has led to students spending increasing amounts of time online, they are left more vulnerable to misinformation spread on these platforms. A 2021 study found that children often start believing in conspiratorial ideas by the age of 14, and many teens find it difficult to critically assess information they find online. Social media also leaves young users highly vulnerable, with research showing that disinformation campaigns often target young people.

Education is an important social determinant of health, playing a critical role in shaping one's opportunities, employment, and income. Schools are not only a place for learning; they are important for children's emotional and social development and are an integral part of children's information environment. They provide a safe place to learn and ask questions, build resilience, and form communities

Regardless of the potential for political interference and concerns from parental rights groups, the public school system and educators possess many of the necessary tools to teach young students how to critically analyse information, encourage thoughtful reflection, and participate in mindful discussions about sensitive topics.

Unfortunately, while some schools do offer media literacy courses, they are not mandatory as part of public school curriculum and are not consistent across classrooms and school boards in Canada. A CBC article recently highlighted a teacher-librarian from Winnipeg who teaches a high school class

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on "Information Literacy in the Age of Fake News," which provides students with lessons on biases, the importance of checking multiple sources, and other skills needed to identify mis/disinformation.

Countries like Finland and Estonia — both of which ranked highly on Open Society Institute's Media Literacy Index in 2021 — have integrated media literacy in the curriculum for kindergarten to high school. This initiative aims to counter mis/disinformation by teaching students from a young age how to assess a range of information on its relevance and reliability.

In Ontario, the quality of public education is being threatened by chronic underfunding, cutbacks, privatization, and a growing anti-LG-BTQIAS2S+ movement, making it difficult for schools to implement important programs to improve information and media literacy and arm students against mis/disinformation. This will no doubt have the largest impact on the most vulnerable students, who have been most disadvantaged by the education and health impacts of the pandemic.

It is clear that now is a critical time to invest in education — an often overlooked social determinant of health. As discussed in the *Lancet*, a strong publicly-funded education system is essential for improving health outcomes and reducing social and economic inequalities. We must ensure that schools have the adequate funding they need to enable educators to empower students to form strong relationships, build trust, have healthy information environments, and be protected from mis/disinformation in all of its forms. ◉

Rishika Wadehra is the Policy Officer at Wellesley Institute, a Toronto-based think tank that does research and policy work on the social determinants of health. She previously completed the Kate McInturff Fellowship in Gender Justice at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in 2021.

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Unsubscribing from neutrality

The On Canada Project

An interview with founder
and editor-in-chief **Samanta Krishnapillai**

Our Schools/Our Selves: Can you tell our readers about the On Canada Project?

Samanta Krishnapillai: We are an independent Canadian media source with over 170K followers that launched in June 2020. We use a warm and witty tone to invite more Canadians into critical conversations about the future of our country and world.

At its heart, the On Canada Project is a love letter to the Canada — and the world — we all deserve to live in.

Our ultimate goal is collective liberation ─ but that isn't possible without disrupting the status quo which centers white supremacy, capitalism, the patriarchy, and other systems of oppression.

We believe that the first step to disrupting the status quo is making sure we can all participate in conversations about the future of our country and world. We know that knowledge is power and our goal is to put the power back in your hands — because remember, an informed demographic is a mobilized one! You shouldn't need a PhD to engage in conversations about the future of our country — it's going to take all of us. So we leverage credible sources, lived experiences and experts, and pair this with a decolonial mindset.

That's really what we're trying to do here at OCP; trying to bridge information gaps and invite more people into conversations by using a conversational and compassionate tone to bring a credible and critical lens to the issues that matter the most right now.

OS/OS: Why did you start? Who contributes?

SK: In May 2020, I felt frustrated with the lack of pandemic communication that centred systemic inequities and marginalized communities. Where were the strategies for what to do if you lived in a multigenerational apartment or shared a bedroom? If you were an essential worker — like at a grocery store — how were you supposed to keep safe?

With a few friends and collaborators, we did an open call on the internet to ask for volunteers to help unpack issues of public health so that everyone had the information they needed to make informed decisions. The On Canada Project was officially launched on June 1, 2020.

Since then we've had over 500 volunteers rotate in and out of our team, offering their insights, lived experience, and creativity to the work we're doing. Now, as we transition from passion project to social enterprise, our team is smaller but still includes some of the most incredible people you'll ever meet.

Our teams — including our writing team — are 85–90% from marginalized communities. When we create something for a client as part of our consulting work, we work hard to ensure that

80% of our staff on these projects are from marginalized communities, particularly QTBI-POC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour).

OS/OS: Who are your key audiences? Is that changing?

SK: If you care about human rights, and are open to learning and unlearning, the work we do is perfect for you. Our social media focuses on Millennials and Gen Z — our tone of writing on Instagram reflects that — but we have a growing Gen X and Baby Boomer community too! The work we do off social media — including OCP Learns — is directed at all generations.

OS/OS: Why do you think your audience has grown as quickly as it has? What are you responding to that others haven't?

SK: We have consciously unsubscribed from neutrality — because you cannot be neutral when you talk about human rights — which allows us to bring warmth, wit and nuance into critical discussions about human rights, justice and collective liberation. We use pop culture, nostalgia for Millennials and Gen Z and trends to bring humour and relevance to what we're talking about.
    We take a community approach to the work we do. While we aren't experts on the issues we talk about, we are expert compassionate communicators. So we leverage our community to find leaders, people with lived experiences, experts, etc to support our work, do Instagram LIVES with us, and collaborate with. We also believe in community over competition — so we amplify other creators or leaders with smaller followings than us because when we rise we want to lift others too.

OS/OS: What have you learned over the course of this work?

SK: I have a long list of mistakes I've made and lessons learnt on my phone's Notes app. The lesson that's made the biggest impact on us is: just because an issue is sticky or uncomfortable to tackle, doesn't mean it shouldn't be discussed.

OS/OS: What issues seem to be resonating most with your audiences?

SK: Indigenous justice, dismantling white supremacy, far right radicalization — and how to combat it, and the future of work

OS/OS: Do you see the On Canada Project as popular education — building and promoting civic and social literacy and engagement?

SK: The On Canada Project has two major arms — the social media content people see on our social media, and a consulting arm that is publicly launching in early 2023. Our consulting arm is paid work we do, both off social media and on it and we've been really fortunate to have worked with a number of partners, including on one of our newest offerings, OCP LEARNS.

OS/OS: How do you see the On Canada Project evolving?

SK: My business partner, Gina Uppal who joined OCP in June 2021, and I have an idea of where I want the On Canada Project to go: tv shows, documentaries, masterclass-like platform for bite-sized videos that allow you to unlearn, an annual summit and activations in between But more importantly, we know what we want the On Canada Project to represent.

We want people to unsubscribe from neutrality with us when discussing human rights. We want to normalize solidarity with communities people aren't personally part of. We want people to stop thinking about the ways things have always been done and start coming up with innovative and inclusive solutions. And we want to do all of this while centring marginalized folks, co-creating with community and always remembering that our individual and organization unlearning journeys are ongoing too — meaning there is always room for improvement, growth, knowing better and doing better. ◉

Samanta Krishnapillai is the founder, managing director and editor-in-chief of the On Canada Project. She is a creative problem solver who actively challenges the status quo. Sam calls herself an accidental entrepreneur as she founded the project while in her Master's at Western University — first as a passion project and then transitioning it into a social enterprise start-up. Follow the On Canada Project's Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/oncanadaproject/ or visit https://oncanadaproject.ca/ to find out more.

Not immune

The neoliberal trajectory of public education reform in Nova Scotia

Angela Gillis and Molly Hurd

December 29, 2022 is the fifth anniversary of Dr. Glaze's report, "Raise the Bar" which dramatically overhauled the governance of Nova Scotia's education system. The "Education Reform Act" (Bill 72) became law just over two months later in early 2018 and effectively dissolved all the province's English language school boards. It also removed principals from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU).

Canada has been described as a superpower in public education on the international stage. It has achieved good results on international comparison studies as well as high levels of equity in academic performance. One of the contributors to these results is the generally constructivist attitude towards education — teaching students to think and problem-solve rather than merely absorb knowledge.

Education is a provincial responsibility and most provinces have public education goals that use language encouraging democracy, fairness, equity, and citizenship. (Nova Scotia's public education system "aims to develop well-rounded, independent, critical thinkers who take initiative and responsibility for their learning.") In the early days of public education in Canada, "success" meant mastery of the 3 R's, but as society has become more diverse and complex, the definition of success has expanded to include the 21st Century competencies of critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, among others.

As this evolution in education was happening, forces have been trying to counter it — initially through the "back to basics" movement which emphasized knowledge and skills that can be easily measured on standardized tests. This corresponds with the increasing marketization of education — the idea that education is a business which can be better handled by the private sector. This dual challenge to progressive education has gained steam recently in the United States, where publicly-funded charter and private schools flourish and "culture wars" are seriously threatening public education.

These "culture wars" are pitting those who believe in democracy, inclusion, and equity against those who claim that schools are indoctrinating children in socialism, openly questioning the premise of equity and inclusion. Disinformation, conspiracy theories and religious fundamentalism are fueling the self-described "anti-woke" lobby. Proponents use inflammatory language such as "pedophilia" and "grooming" to describe curricula and books which educate children about sexuality and gender identity or make disparaging accusations about "critical race theory" to describe teaching about racial issues and history. In

the U.S., so-called anti-woke forces have succeeded in getting anti-trans laws passed, in suppressing the instruction of race, history, and 2SLGBTQAI+ issues, and in banning certain books in schools or libraries. "Parental choice" and "parents' rights" have become code for the increasing privatization of what was conceived of as a public good.

Here in Canada, recent school board elections in Ontario and BC — among other provinces — have seen scores of "anti-woke" candidates openly expressing anti-2SLGBT-QIA+ and racist views, some receiving training from the well-funded American right-wing think tank, the Leadership Institute. Fortunately, only a small percentage of these individuals were elected, so their influence through school boards — so far — is minimal.

However, the disturbing issue is that we are no longer merely emulating anti-democratic trends from the U.S.; there is now an organized, concerted effort to train people to infiltrate boards, lobby, propagandize and, eventually, change legislation. Left unconfronted and unchecked, this could ultimately result in a population that will be less prepared for the challenges of our increasingly complex world.

Given these threats to democratic education, how is Nova Scotia positioned — and what steps are being taken — for it to hold on to its aims of developing "well-rounded, independent, critical thinkers"?

Unfortunately, we are not optimistic. Since the elimination of English language school boards in Nova Scotia, communication with the "Regional Centres for Education" (RCEs — their unelected replacement) has become a one-way street with communities having no formal channels to express concerns or advocate on issues important to them. The removal of that mechanism for democratic engagement and feedback has made it easier for a government to impose top-down curricula and directives. Another major repercussion is the loss of voices from the African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities, as identified by Adam Davies, a former school board member. Under the old system, each board had dedicated seats for a member from each group, voted on by self-identified members of that population. This was incredibly important when considering

educational initiatives on Indigenous issues or anti-racist education — all important for teaching the critical thinking so essential for citizenship.

There are already indications of where Nova Scotia is potentially headed, with regard to undermining many of the progressive gains of the past decades. One only has to look at the Alberta government's attempt at curriculum rewriting, to correct a "schooling system where many students have been hard-wired with collectivist ideas," according to then-Premier Jason Kenney. School trustees in Alberta were at the forefront of opposition to the government's anti-collectivist curriculum revamp; without trustees, Nova Scotia will be in a much weaker position to counter such attempts.

Along with removing school boards, denying principals the protection of a union may eliminate another obstacle to education reforms in line with neoliberal goals. Prior to Bill 72, principals acted as curriculum leaders, whose main role was to support the teachers; being in the union was an important part of this purpose. The Nova Scotia Teachers' Union (NSTU) was established in1895 to, "…exert an influence in gaining better salary and aid teachers in securing better results in their school work." The protective nature of a union allowed both teachers and principals to contribute to reforming education in the best interests of the students without fear of retribution. When Bill 72 removed administrators from NSTU, and created the Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia (PSAANS), its members were not able to organise their own union or take labour action. They remain affiliated with, but are not members of, the NSTU. The affiliation, reaffirmed by a vote in 2022, allows them to leave administration and return to the classroom and the union.

Without union support, administrators may feel vulnerable when challenging situations arise, such as being directed to impose new programs that may have been developed with minimal teacher consultation. Further, their position has been refocused, moving away from curriculum leadership and towards management. Finally, with many administrators choosing to return to teaching roles or retiring, recruitment is becoming an issue. Experienced teachers are often not interested in leaving the protection of the NSTU or in being managers, so in order to attract candidates RCEs are dropping some of the requirements. This means at least some aspiring administrators will have far less experience and, potentially, education than the teachers they will be leading. Will they

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be well-positioned to push back against government decisions that may not be pedagogically sound?

Before Bill 72, back in 2017 the then-Liberal government had, through Bill 75, imposed a contract on teachers which removed negotiated benefits. Though the NSTU successfully challenged this in the courts, to date, no reparations have been made. BIll 75 was a galvanising event for teachers, who, with parents, protested and were at least partially responsible for the much reduced majority the Liberals were given in the election shortly after.

Unfortunately, the combined impact of these two bills has contributed to the demoralisation of educators who saw their autonomy undermined and their working conditions worsened (documented in "Teachers' Voices: An Independent Survey of Nova Scotia's Teachers"). This demoralization was no doubt exacerbated by the province's sudden and unilateral decision to legislate school psychologists, speech pathologists, and other specialists out of the NSTU (reinstated as a result of another court challenge). In addition, some NSTU work is being done by other employees: counselling, substitute teaching, and hallway monitoring are positions that are now sometimes filled by non-teachers.

The Liberals were voted out in the 2021 election, perhaps partially because of promises made by the incoming Progressive Conservatives to revisit educational governance, and reinstate school boards. However, to date, they have shown no sign of doing so. In fact, it appears that the trajectory of introducing more programs that further the marketization of education will continue.

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thinking and media literacy skills that they need right across the curriculum, they need to be supported and respected. Many Nova Scotian teachers have been looking to the U.S. teachers' unions which have become more militant recently after years of being marginalized and underpaid. Local grassroots organization, Educators for Social Justice-Nova Scotia (ESJ-NS), is promoting union learning opportunities such as Jane McAlevey's *Organizing for Power* to increase engagement and awareness of benefits of unionism. Strong education unions, teacher awareness of union protection and advocacy, an educated electorate and strong, transparent, functioning elected school boards are essential for democracy to survive.

With the contradictory-named, anti-democratic "Keeping Students in Class" Act, Ontario (at the time of writing) is facing a showdown with workers that will be watched with interest by everyone in the country, especially in Nova Scotia where many education workers are currently striking. When our democracy is threatened by the very people we elected it is time for the people and their unions to mobilize! ◉

Angela Gillis teaches elementary school and has been a member of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union for 25 years. She has Master of Education degrees in Curriculum and Instruction as well as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. In her spare time, she is trying to regain elements of her culture, virtually lost through generations of English immersion, by studying Cape Breton Step Dance and Gàidhlig. **Molly Hurd** has had a wide variety of teaching experiences in northern Quebec, rural Nova Scotia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Britain. She was teacher and Headteacher at Halifax Independent School for 20 years and is the author of "Best School in the World: How students, teachers and parents have created a model that can transform Canada's public schools". Angela and Molly are both longstanding members of Educators for Social Justice—NS.

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