



Extremist Ideologies: Youth and Schools

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Abstract

According to a House of Commons Report (2022) on public safety, hate motivated ideologies are spreading consistently across Canada. Moreover, the Report cites youth among those particularly vulnerable to right-wing ideologies thereby complementing the literature that suggests that youth and radical right-wing ideologies are positioned at a precarious intersection. Particularly notable and worth distinguishing are youth cultural right-wing extremist groups whose ambition is not completely independent from right-wing extremists. Youth cultural right-wing extremist groups especially rely on the internet and social media as a means of recruiting members to the organization and to spread widely their radical ideologies. It is not enough, though, to make overly simplistic claims that youth, such as the youth cultural right-wing extremists, have a periphery existence in cyber spaces and a generalized association to more sophisticated right-wing extremist groups. Youth cultural right-wing extremist groups are characteristic of cultures that consist of a hateful discourse that celebrates ethnonationalist values, beliefs, and traditions. Research points to the fact that the dialogue, often antagonistic, appeals to youth that are attracted by these radical views. Education systems have been identified as sites where radical and extremist tendencies and ideologies can be directly addressed by educators, given the substantial amount of time that youth spend in schools. The paper discusses both the interventions and implications related to addressing extremist ideologies in educational contexts.

Keywords: education, right-wing youth extremists

1. Introduction

There is an undeniable emergence of hate rhetoric particularly inspired by extremist ideologies. It has become a world-wide phenomenon (Blazak, 2022; Perry et al., 2022; Wilson & Halpin, 2022). North America, including Canada, is implicated by the disturbing radical perspectives that are intended on cultivating racism and discrimination. In most instances, hate speech singles out specific groups that become the targets of criticism (Wong et al., 2015). As an implication, therefore, the circulation of these extremist views lends itself to the formation of radicalized groups across varied societal sectors that share an allegiance and belief in the necessary preservation of traditional values and nationalist sentiments and

then, direct their disparagement upon those that do not share in these objectives (Freilich et al., 2009). In many cases, these groups are Right-Wing extremists that not only aim to disseminate radical ideologies to broader audiences, but also can encourage violent and aggressive acts in order to underscore their mandate (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006). The proliferation of social media across online platforms has contributed significantly to the dissemination of extremist rhetoric. The virtual platforms include like-minded individuals that can exercise their agency to legitimize the value they derive in these communities (Cherubini, 2024b). According to Davey et al. (2020), hate groups in Canada have tripled. Seemingly consistent, moreover, are the sentiments of national identity in the members' discourse that serves to bring attention to the fact that anti-nationalist socio-political policies and practices must be undermined at all costs (Nagle, 2017).

Particularly notable and worth distinguishing are youth cultural right-wing extremist groups whose ambition is not completely independent from Right-Wing extremists. The youth cultural right-wing extremist groups especially rely on the internet and social media as a means of recruiting members to the organization and to spread widely their radical ideologies (Freilich et al., 2009). Their intolerant ideologies are broadcast across alternative virtual platforms. Youth, perhaps less surprising, are one of the highest consumers of social and digital media and, according to Daniels (2009), represent Generation M since they believe the internet and social media spaces to be reliable venues to inform the perceptions and understandings of their social lives (Lenhart et al., 2005; Rideout et al., 2010). The youth cultural right-wing extremists generalize nationalist principles often couched in emotional appeals to suggest a rational justification for the dissatisfaction prospective members may be experiencing. The literature points to the fact that some youths are enticed to the solidarity and sense of belonging promoted by the youth cultural right-wing extremists that, in turn, serves to heighten their self-esteem (Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Since youth spend a vast majority of their time in educational spaces, schools themselves have been discussed in the literature as focal points to study further not only the emergence and spread of hateful rhetoric, but also the potential of these extremist groups to attract new members by their hate-motivated ideologies (Cherubini, 2024a).

2. Context

It is both timely and necessary to examine further the spread of radical ideological perspectives among youth (see, for example, Gereluk, 2023). It is not enough to make overly simplistic claims that youth, such as the youth cultural right-wing extremists, have a periphery existence in cyber spaces and a generalized association to more sophisticated right-wing extremist groups. What we are unlikely to find, if we defer to these instances, are rigorous accounts and explanations of the adverse implications that trouble the minds of adolescents that succumb to the false draw of these radical groups. Radicalization, in the context of this discussion, "emphasizes the process by which an individual youth or group of youth becomes more extremist in nature" (Gereluk, 2023, p. 434). It also implies an orientation towards extremist perspectives and worldviews that supports radical behaviour (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Youth better associate, in these circumstances, with the radical ideologies espoused by the extremist groups and are persuaded that nationalist identity and traditions need to be reclaimed (Cherubini, 2024b).

Radicalization, hence, targets members of out-groups in order to accomplish the political objectives that motivate their ideologies (Doosje et al., 2016; Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Radicalization lends itself to adopting close minded and self-serving perspectives characteristic of extremism (Schmid, 2013; Van den Bos, 2018). It is important to note that,

as Ahmad (2017) distinguishes, youth are typically in the formative development years when the concepts of self and identity are being negotiated, and in the case of youth right-wing extremists, are perhaps even more susceptible to external influences. Radicalization, in these cases, presents already vulnerable youth with a sense of identity in a manner that is self-affirming and not necessarily derived from their immediate communities and surroundings (see, also, Bizina & Gray, 2014). The literature suggests that radicalized youth are at greater risk of exhibiting atypical behaviour (Emmelkamp et al., 2020).

In order to better appreciate the association between the risk factors related to behaviour and the process of radicalization as it is discussed in the literature, it is important to contextualize the concepts of activism and perceived in-group superiority. Activism is the risk-factor most closely associated with radicalization and understood as the “participation in legal, non-violent ideologically motivated acts” (Emmelkamp et al., 2020, p. 6). For some, activism is considered an initial phase in the process of becoming more radicalized, and in some instances, further prone to extremist ideologies (see, for example, Bjorgo & Gjelsvik, 2017; Van den Bos, 2018).

Just as activism is implicated in the process of radicalization, so too is perceived in-group superiority. This concept, in turn, suggests that one’s in-group is considered superior to other out-groups (Mazarr, 2004). The literature points to a construction of social reality that consists of in- and out-groups. These groups assume and embody distinct and contrasting paradigms that distinguish damaging characteristics of out-groups and in the process underscore the superiority of their own membership – the outcomes, thus, include racist and discriminatory ideologies and actions (McLeod, 2008). In this way, members perceive the behaviour and actions of their in-group in a far more favourable light; conversely, the behaviour and actions of out-group members are perceived as undesirable (Borum, 2011).

The aforementioned social construction and the radicalization process itself is applicable to youth cultural right-wing extremists that adopt activist efforts and hold true to perceptions of in-group superiority. Particularly in the west, various governments have assumed active political agendas to address the radicalization of youth, including targeted interventions in education systems and programs (Davies, 2018). In these situations, the school board and school administrators, as well as teachers, seem to assume a direct responsibility for the successful implementation of these programs and initiatives. However, these initiatives do not come without the possibility of significant repercussions. For example, some researchers have identified various ethical implications with introducing security-related measures in education programs and curriculum (see, to cite one study, Miller, Mills, & Harkins, 2011). Taylor and Soni (2017), to cite another example, suggest that paradigms related to security can in fact challenge and potentially destabilize the concepts related to the fundamental rights of freedom of thought and expression, lending itself to a sense of heightened unease and apprehension among educators and students since their learning environments risk becoming more reminiscent of surveillance-type climates (see, too, Sjoen & Jore, 2019). For these academics, the inclusion of security measures in the formal and informal curriculum of schools may warrant a reconsideration of the purpose of education and the respective roles of educators in the context of these interventions.

From a Canadian perspective specifically, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, 2009) clarified that radicalization may be manifest differently in Canada in comparison to European countries that are experiencing a more prominent presence of right-wing extremist ideologies. Several years after the RCMP declaration, however, Mitchell (2016) cited the report by The Standing Senate Committee that was critical of the fact that the pertinent discussions related to extremism (and terrorism, for that matter) that informed policy

decisions often did not include the voice and perspectives of educators (Senate of Canada, 2015). The Report recommended that programs be established that include clear information about the characteristics most commonly associated with radical behaviour and radicalization, and that the information be made readily accessible to teachers in order to better equip them with an understanding of extremist ideologies.

3. Discussion and Implications

Clear in the context of the research inquiry is the fact that youth cultural right-wing extremists are informing the social and political thought in Canada. The members of these organizations seem to take the lead from the more recognized and arguably advanced right-wing movements that have origins in European nations and influence across North America. These youth seem to have a fundamental contention with contemporary political and social policies that, in their view, undermine nationalist notions of identity and tradition at the expense of what they claim will be an unsustainable future.

Education systems and schools have been identified as sites where radical and extremist tendencies and ideologies can be directly addressed by educators, given the substantial amount of time that youth spend in schools. Some of the key initiatives related to school interventions are focused predominantly on the ideals of inclusion and support (Sjoen & Mattson, 2020). Schools, in these cases, house the necessary programs and education interventions to counter the radical thought assumed by some youth and to enable a greater degree of resilience in the face of extremist ideology on the part of all students; the aim, thus, is to foster in youth the necessary political and social worldviews that endorse human rights and peaceful relations (see Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, & Zammit, 2016). Educators, in these learning spaces, can then exercise preventative measures that foster a sense of resilience in all students by modeling a political orientation on the basis of human rights and peace (Sjoen & Jore, 2019). The educational response is on critical citizenship with the intent of preventing radicalization and extremist ideologies from surfacing (Davies, 2014).

Students will, in light of these educational objectives, effectively understand the adverse implication of extremist ideologies and (as can be presumed) be afforded the necessary opportunities in both formal and creative circumstances to make sense of them given the unique conditions of their own lives. In these ways, youth can better decipher the extremist paradigms, framed in troubling terms of references, that are meant to mislead and guide their perception of contemporary society.

Through education, youth can learn the necessary skills to be more critical about the nationalist ideals espoused by extremist right-wing groups, including their calls for the membership to demonstrate their sense of activism and protest the pending social and political injustices. It has been proposed that education interventions focused on radical and extremist ideologies be implemented in formal school spaces under the mandate of citizenship education (Aly, Taylor, & Karnovsky, 2014). In Ontario (Canada), the compulsory Grade 10 Civics and Citizenship course would seem to align nicely with the aforementioned recommendations. Among the framing questions of the curriculum are ones that identify a critical awareness of digital media platforms and misinformation:

How has the rise of social media and other forms of digital media facilitated new opportunities for citizens with similar and differing beliefs and values to engage with one another, the government, and other institutions? How can digital/social media platforms impact democracy and shape public discourse through the spread of information and misinformation? (OME, Strand B, 2022)

As a component of the political inquiry related to the Civics and Citizenship course, students are required to consider transferable skills (digital literacy and critical thinking, as two examples) to research information and evaluate it on the basis of its credibility, including any inherent bias as it may be grounded in social and traditional media (OME, Parents Guide, 2022).

Likewise, the revised Grade 9 English curriculum (2023) in Ontario also focuses on the development of students' media literacy and critical literacy skills. Students are required to think critically about the point of view presented in texts by questioning and evaluating the respective information (OME, Grade 9 English, 2023). While the cited examples from the OME do not explicitly identify measures to counter the recognition of radical ideologies and behaviour in youth, they do nonetheless imply focused attention on students' digital literacy skills and awareness. In doing so, students become more familiar with using and selecting appropriate digital tools to communicate:

Students manage their digital footprint by engaging in social media and online communities respectfully, inclusively, safely, legally, and ethically. Students understand their rights with respect to personal data and know how to protect their privacy and security and respect the privacy and security of others. Students analyze and understand the impact of technological advancements on society, and society's role in the evolution of technology. (OME, Transferable Skills, 2023)

Evident in the Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives is the emphasis on developing the awareness of youth of what it means to live in healthy and prosperous communities. The intent is to enhance their capacity to reflect more broadly and critically on texts and their respective sources. Youth are encouraged, through the provincial curriculum, to connect the details of the text, be they print, media, or electronic sources, through the lens of critical citizenship. Youth will take seriously divisive points of view and be able to question assumptions and biases.

Equally significant, though, is the distinction established in the literature that cautions educators on implementing interventions that focus upon identifying individual students as vulnerable (O'Donnell, 2018). Consider that,

The vulnerability approach can imply that something is wrong with the student. Discourses are, after all, not uniform; they can be contradictory and complex, and for these participants, this discourse on vulnerability is met with resistance, as it focuses exclusively on students' psychopathology, and not on how the student, through citizenship education, can interact with his or her environment. (Sjoen & Mattson, 2020)

It seems that the point of invoking counter-radical interventions through educational programs is to gear the intervention in a manner that is sensible and relative to the entire population of students. The interventions, according to the literature, must be relevant to all student narratives and be, what I assume, natural pedagogical progressions of the formal curriculum. The discourse, whether on critical or digital literacy, needs to pertain to civility and citizenship, and not assume instructional strategies that mean to coerce specific and vulnerable students. According to the literature, it is generally more constructive, instead, to appeal to what may very well be the unrealized awareness of all students that may not have been exposed to extremist ideologies and have not acquired a nuanced understanding of its deceptiveness.

The above implication on student welfare in the conversation related to the vulnerability approach further extends to the roles of educators. Teachers and principals may not feel

comfortable with the responsibility to identify students that they essentially perceive to be vulnerable to extremist ideologies. As Sjoen and Mattson (2020) argue, among others, teachers and educators may not have sufficient experience to formally identify a student to a school administrator, nor might they perceive themselves to be sufficiently trained in the practice of distinguishing student behaviours specific to radicalism. The research suggests that identifying a particular student that has suspected inclinations to extremist ideologies and radical behaviour to other educators may essentially erode the professional student-teacher relationship in the classroom and school. It may have serious effects on how the student identified to be vulnerable relates to the other students in the school community if their dubious distinction is revealed. Such a distinction may also be harmful for the student's engagement in their learning.

Note, then, Gereluk's (2023) endorsement of what she identifies as a whole-school approach that offers a genuine sense of belonging and empowering to all students, including vulnerable youth. It is proposed that those students already feeling marginalized in school communities will be less likely to engage in radical communities and discover an affiliation with extremist ideologies. Unlike an interventionist approach that isolates vulnerable youth in the school community, Gereluk's model positions education in a holistic context whereby all students have opportunities to experience solidarity in an inclusive and nurturing learning climate. From an Ontario perspective, it is interesting that the author cites Chapter 5 of an act to amend the Education Act that singles out the purpose "to create schools in Ontario that are safe, inclusive and accepting of all pupils To encourage a positive school climate and prevent inappropriate behaviour, including bullying, sexual assault, gender-based violence and incidents based on homophobia, transphobia or biphobia" (Ontario Accepting Schools Act, Sec 300.1.2., 2012). A whole-school approach is reluctant to isolate specific students that belong to the school community.

I note that this does not misrepresent the intention to address radical thought and extremist views as they may be surfacing in youth cultures across the school communities, but rather is a strict adherence to the value of inclusion in calculated responses to what can be very contentious issues. The approach would also seem to be more conducive to teachers' willingness to assume meaningful and active roles in addressing the topic. Their pedagogical perspectives and instructional strategies can complement the aspects of inclusivity that, at least ideally, permeate across the school culture. In doing so, their professional relations with students would seem to be far less compromised since the critical discourse in light of the interventions can be framed in certain holistic and constructive contexts, and not necessarily be associated to specific students. It is an approach, in view of this discussion, that fully understands the aspects of students' experiences in school and, thus, embodies the principles of inclusivity to be attentive to the need for enabling resilience in all students regardless of their exposure of or experience with radical and extremist ideologies.

Relatedly, Ahmad (2017) recommends that schools (and middle and secondary schools in particular) structure dedicated time for youth to engage in,

open dialogue [where they can] express their worldviews, perceived injustices, social and political concerns. While schools are busy teaching principles of math, biology, and other technical subjects, open learning is forgotten where youth can speak on topics that are absent in the curriculum. (p. 157)

There are parallels to Gereluk's whole school approach. In both models, students can experience a sense of belonging to a larger community of critical citizens and supportive educators. As well, youth can derive a sense of empowerment in educative spaces designed for the critical expression of their views. In these cases, students have agency and voice. One

can easily presume that since both frameworks facilitate critical and open reflection and dialogue youth would be less reluctant to seek alternative online spaces.

Yet, there may exist the possibility, across these models, that students might be reluctant to express candid and explicit thoughts and opinions in school spaces facilitated by their teachers. Those students that might have questions about harmful extremist right-wing ideologies may not be willing to risk even the suggestion that they favour radical views. If there is some merit in these implications, then the question of who is in the best position to facilitate critical conversations in an open dialogue and exchange of views must be asked and subsequently considered?

Furthermore, educators are tasked with the issue of structuring the open learning spaces into the already demanding and compact schedule of the school day. In other words, if open learning opportunities are factored into the daily schedule, what aspect of the formal curriculum is removed? And at what cost to student achievement and success? Last, while the literature makes clear that the internet and social media are attractive to youth and are a platform for radicalization and recruitment (Hollewell & Longpre, 2022), an additional tangible challenge for educators is to create open learning and inclusive school spaces that are more lucrative to youth than the solidarity they perceive to exist in radical and extremist virtual communities.

4. Conclusion

It may be wise for educators to be mindful of the influence that radical ideologies can enact upon youth. Equally sensible is the need to acquire a heightened awareness of the serious implications of extremist thought and rhetoric and not to underestimate that classrooms and schools themselves are components of the same landscape where ideologies of hate and discrimination prevail. The youth that perceive that their narrative is not represented in contemporary social and political programs that they believe aim to undercut nationalist ideals may be especially vulnerable to the lure of youth cultural extremist groups that, conversely, offer a sense of belonging and solidarity. Yet, the literature cautions that interventions targeted to vulnerable youth in schools may be very counterproductive. Those youth identified by school authorities may experience a sense of marginalization from the same community to which they already feel excluded. Interventions that label youth as vulnerable may also jeopardize any feelings of trust that these students may have established with teachers.

Instead, programs that are more holistic in nature and adopt widespread measures in inclusive communities of discourse may better serve to establish more sustaining school cultures. In these spaces, students are invited to share their perspectives and questions about the radical and extremist discourses that prevail in both the physical school environment, and in the online virtual platforms. How school systems and educators are ultimately held to account is inevitably an extension of these actions. As leaders of open learning systems that foster the inclusive learning environments, educators at all levels may have to be open-minded of diverse student perspectives related to right wing ideologies and be able to negotiate what may be a very sensitive balance of affirming students' contributions and questions, but not necessarily negating their agency as independent thinkers. Simultaneously, teachers are tasked to provide an educative environment that enlightens all students to the false deception of right-wing extremist thought.

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