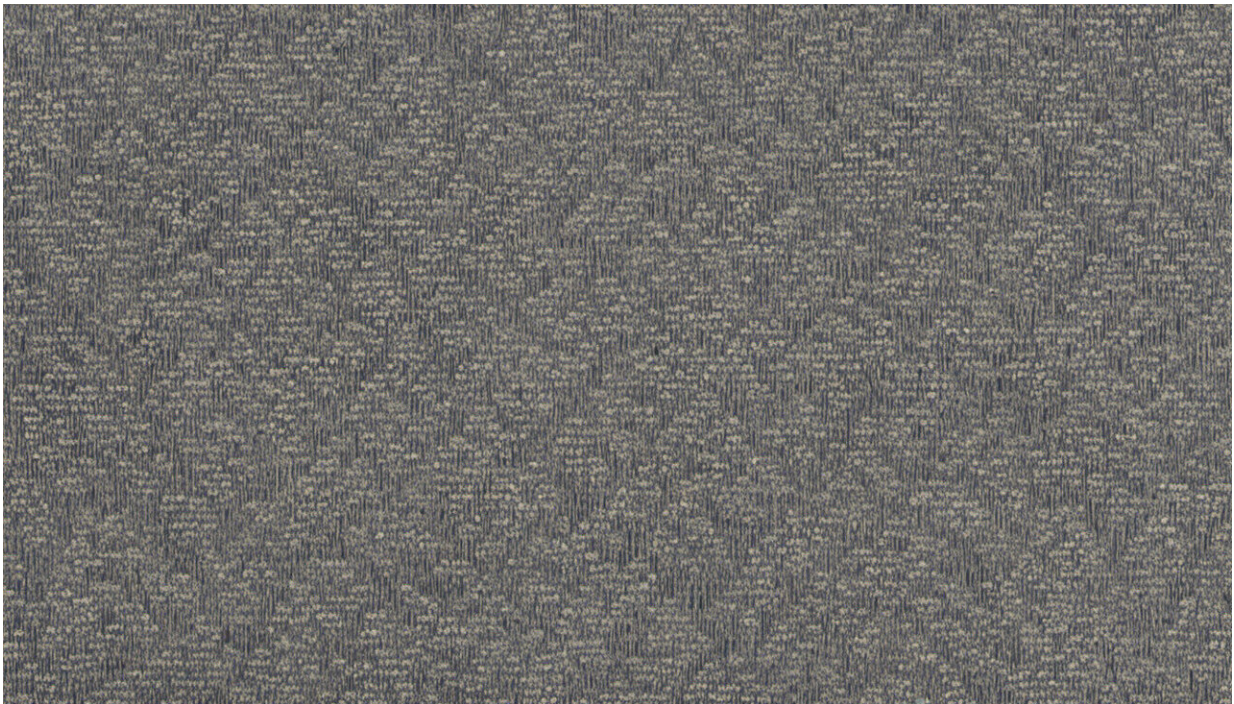


How schools can foster civic discussion in an age of incivility

November 19 2018, by Dianne Gereluk



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What is the role of classrooms in an era of [political polarization](#) and rising [extremist ideologies](#), [hate crimes](#) and [violence](#)?

Schools have the [opportunity](#), and arguably, an obligation to [address civic engagement and political civility](#). The extent to which schools

foster political deliberation, engagement, understanding and empathy has far-reaching implications for our democracy.

But can schools really do that?

Canadians have become more aware of the troubling realities of the full legacy of educational systems in Canada and how they have worked.

[The Indian Residential School system](#) emerged as a key tool of colonization that [systemically attempted](#) cultural genocide. The schools wreaked both abuse and intergenerational trauma.

With regards to mainstream schooling, educator and researcher George Sefa Dei looks through an anti-racist lens to examine how "[gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity influence teaching, learning and educational administration](#)" and impact students' involvement. Public education has been characterized by [racism and exclusion](#).

Schools can [do better](#). They have the opportunity to foster an environment where all students experience respect and actually want to talk to each other across differences.

Explore nuanced stories

The aim of all radicalized groups is to create an absolute truth among their members. For this reason, a primary task of schools is to interrupt one particular ideology and world view. Yet historically, schools and in particular [their history lessons](#), have been quite poor at telling nuanced stories.

Our curriculum must move away from positioning wars and events as faceoffs between winners and losers. Such caricatures of political and historical strife may heighten polarization and isolation, and encourage a

[narrow form of citizenship](#).

Address racism

In Canada, we're seeing a rise of white nationalist politics and [reported acts of hate](#). These facts make it clear that schools should particularly address [an exclusive understanding of citizenship and Canadian identity informed by racist ideas of who belongs to Canada](#).

As they begin to confront white supremacy and all forms of extremism, schools must also seriously ponder how to address [the narrowing of students' affiliations and identities to the exclusion of others](#).

Who shows up in the curriculum, and in what roles is significant. Representations of gender, [sexuality](#), racialization and ethnicity matter; discussions of immigration, recent or historic, will also matter in students' eyes.

Being attentive to the informal and formal ways in which teachers reduce divisions between "us" and "them" will be a step in the right direction. Students who feel ostracized, marginalized or silenced will necessarily not feel part of broader society, but rather as an outcast, [an "Other."](#)

So how educators create opportunities for students to see themselves as valued members of the broader community matters. Being valued is good for all students and could have a deep impact on those at [risk of being radicalized](#).

Slogans have got to go

Being truthful about historical injustices, while carefully inviting all

students into a dialogue, helps redress how to move forward in ways that might build trust.

The aim is to create an opening for more honest talk about history. The philosopher Judith Butler argues that such an honest examination ultimately allows us to "[imagine and practice another future](#)."

Media portrayals often highlight characteristics of people involved in extremist or harmful acts as abnormal. Such [caricatures](#) help to ease anxiety that people doing harmful things may be "among us." It becomes easy to believe it is villains who harm: People totally unlike us and wholly unrelated to our lives. Additionally, we obscure how our societies could better support individuals who become radicalized.

Schools also have an opportunity to challenge the rhetoric and slogans used in the broader political climate.

By unpacking the language that is commonly seen and heard on T-shirts, protest marches, speeches, songs, [social media](#) and so forth, schools could build the capacity of students to [engage in civil conversations](#).

Teach how to deliberate

Ideology aims to advance one view and one way forward; the educational response must encourage deliberation. But sadly, the evidence to date suggests that on the whole, most schools' ability to create the space for political deliberation is [negligible](#).

When classrooms create learning environments that invite respectful dialogue and [deliberation](#) students may become better equipped to develop dispositions suited for community. They learn how to weigh the evidence and understand the diversity of values and beliefs at play. They become more apt to listen and consider alternative perspectives.

The simple act of talking and building inclusive [school](#) communities helps mitigate [extremist ideologies](#).

In this way, children and youth would learn tools for the future to help them live together in society despite our most fundamental political, religious, and social disagreements about how to live.

Schools have an opportunity to see students having a voice as and as contributing members of society. They have the opportunity to develop students' voices and agency to develop [greater political civility and civic engagement](#).

Let's make the most of it.

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