

# High School Social Studies Teachers and their Tactics for Justice

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Article abstract

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## *High School Social Studies Teachers and their Tactics for Justice*

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### Abstract

*What tactics are high school educators using to teach about socio-political changes in the past and present? Five educators in the province of Alberta (two women, three men; four urban, one rural; four White, one Arab; four without visible religious garb, one Muslim in hijab) explored content they considered to be “radical” and how they teach about (and for) significant socio-political changes focused on making society hurt less. Coming from a perspective of symbolic evil, radical love, and radical imagination as inherent to beneficial social movements, the researchers used process and dramaturgical coding to analyze participant insights about decolonial and anti-racist education as well as teaching for gender and sexual justice. Participants shared insights about the role of school context and teacher positionality, what might shape an educator to teach for radical change, as well as several tactics: operationalizing positionality, supplementing curriculum, challenging assumptions, subverting school rules, and addressing emotionality.*



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## Introduction

In social studies education, the current socio-political milieu invites both teachers and students to examine interlocking (Razack, 1998) and intersecting (Crenshaw, 1991) forms of violence and thus expose systems that urgently need significant changes (or to be abolished altogether). As part of our processes of rethinking, reimagining, and taking action as authors of this article, we asked the following questions: *How are high school social studies teachers conceptualizing "radical change," and what tactics are they using to support radical change for justice?* In the context of the Alberta Social Studies curriculum's emphasis on "social participation as democratic practice" (Alberta Education, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), participants were asked to consider the content they teach, as well as their intentions and methods for teaching that content. After the initial study was completed, we conducted an additional interview with each participant to and ask them about what experiences they believed shaped them into educators who teach for significant socio-political changes for justice.

This project is part of our efforts to think alongside educators toward the shared goal of living in societies that hurt less—by co-creating approaches to encourage radical changes toward justice while preventing reactionary extremism. The authors of this article are a team consisting of two undergraduate and two graduate students, as well as a professor, all of whom are seeking to engage thoughtfully with movements for justice in and out of the classroom. Oppenheimer and Lakey (1965) highlighted the need to teach tactics toward democratic goals (see also Martell & Stevens, 2021), and this article primarily focuses on identifying educational tactics that participants considered to be urgently needed in order to support socio-political change.

For this small-scale and exploratory study, we co-created interview knowledge with teacher participants. Specifically, together we explored what "radical change" might be within and beyond social studies curriculum—with special attention to emerging movements today (e.g., Black Lives Matter, or BLM), as well as the tactics they use to educate toward their visions of radical change. Moving from awareness to action is important for justice work within (and beyond) the classroom, and so this article is intended to highlight the intentionality of teachers' pedagogical decisions to counter systemic violence and uplift forces of change.

## Teaching for Change and Justice

Social studies and related fields have been home to many discussions about teaching for change toward more just societies. Often such approaches are labeled as "social justice," but as Ladson-Billings (2015) has illuminated, "social" justice does not encapsulate all of the injustice, and instead prefers not to qualify justice: It is "just justice." There is already robust work on the principles that undergird the social movements studied in social studies, such as in history and civics classrooms, as well as the principles of teaching for activism, which will be outlined below. Such inquiries can be deepened through examinations of the ways teachers are enacting principles of justice in a variety of ways, and in the present study we specifically looked at teacher tactics in Alberta.

Teachers can invite students to learn about past activism with a view toward vital criticality. Part of this criticality involves curricular choices regarding the time period and relative success of the movement, as well as refusing to limit discussions to sanitized, heroic individuals, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks (e.g., Busey & Walker, 2017; see also Woodson, 2016).

The “how” is as important as the “what.” Parkhouse (2018) found that the critical educators she studied used three approaches to enhance students’ critical consciousness and concomitant sense of agency: naming, questioning, and demystification. Through explicitly naming both injustices and the actions taken to counter them and destabilizing the authority of dominant narratives, teachers can encourage political action among students. Such insights from Busey and Walker (2017) and Parkhouse (2018) are key, and this research project builds on this work by examining the tactics of five educators in a context outside of the United States.

It is important to examine how educators think and teach about activism and significant socio-political changes that stem from such activism, including specific tactics that have worked for past movements. Such tactics can include breaking compliance and obedience (e.g., Lakey, 2003), which builds off of what is known in social psychology about the dangers of destructive obedience (e.g., Milgram, 1963). Community context is abundantly apparent, for example, in the “revolutionary intercommunalism” enacted by groups like the Black Panthers (People’s Kitchen Collective, n.d.) as well as how activist knowledge can operate between different spaces (and of particular interest is the bridging into educational contexts; Niesz, 2021). It is also important to note the role of non-human factors, such how technology can shape social activism in helpful and unhelpful ways (Howell & Schmitzer, 2022; Krutka, 2018; Mendes, et al., 2019).

One significant issue regarding classroom tactics are assumptions about bringing “other” voices into the existing structure instead of treating these perspectives as equals (Donald, 2009; see also Sabzalian, 2019). In other words, instead of simply *incorporating* or *infusing* perspectives (Donald, 2013) from beyond grand narratives (Stanley, 2006), there is a need for engagements beyond mere additive inclusion toward an unquestioned common sense (Kumashiro, 2015). Such engagements include content and wisdom that foster *decoloniality* (i.e., a mindset that decolonizes knowledge and being that exists beyond the historical process of decolonization; e.g., Mignolo, 2012). Decoloniality is an important component of literal decolonization in order to open up possibilities for imagining how we might disrupt and even replace Eurocentric, white supremacist, settler colonial, and capitalist assumptions that often go unquestioned.

It is important for social studies educators to not succumb to neutrality—and instead look to resistance (e.g., Helfenbein, 2005). Included in resistance is (re)thinking how positionality and lived experience can affect what and how teachers teach, as well as how they feel about themselves and their teaching (e.g., An, 2020; Duncan, 2021; Hawkman, 2020; Saleh, 2021; Swalwell, 2018). Educators can respond in their teaching and personal development to what the moment demands (Stevens & Martell, 2021). Educators can benefit from conversations and experiences directly or indirectly related to the curriculum, such as antiracism in theory and practice (e.g., Hawkman, 2020), as well as the emotionality of anti-complicity pedagogy (Zembylas, 2020). In order to move toward the ethical stance of anti-complicity, the concepts of *symbolic evil* and *radical love* are helpful for educators seeking to manifest radical change in their contexts.

## Conceptual Framework

The concepts that informed the planning of this research project and our analysis are symbolic evil (e.g., Baudrillard, 2004/2005), radical love, and radical imagination (e.g. hooks; 1994/2006; Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020). Although these concepts emerged from distinctly different ways of thinking about the world, as authors we find that they are a powerful framing when woven together. Specifically, symbolic evil alongside radical love and radical imagination

highlight not only what it might mean to be “radical” but also a establishes a set of ethics that can help educators persevere in radical thought and action toward justice.

### *Symbolic Evil*

Baudrillard makes an important distinction between symbolic evil and moral evil. While moral evil is a bad or negative *outcome*, symbolic evil is a *force* that is neither good nor bad in itself; rather, it is “intelligent... in the sense that it is implied automatically in every one of our acts” (Baudrillard, 2004/2005, p. 160). Symbolic evil is an energy that is embedded in any radical process of metamorphosis and becoming. It is a force that individuals and communities can tap into as they seek to make radical socio-political changes. Baudrillard was concerned at how many critical strategies can easily be absorbed into the existing system, and so (perhaps) this concern explains a lack of an exact prescription for engaging with symbolic evil or ways to even to recognize it.

At its best, symbolic evil can be a vital force of radical change that anyone can tap into in order the reinvigorate a society. Tapping into symbolic evil involves deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions and practices, imagining different futures, and taking action to break the status quo. As such, symbolic evil as a force exposes humanity and all of its metaphorical warts by offering an opportunity to change and find meaning. Symbolic evil is necessary to avoid stagnation, and it can take the form of social activism that engages in “fatal strategies” (Kline & Holland, 2020) to force a system to reverse its course, such as undoing settler colonial, white supremacist assumptions and practices.

Part of tapping into symbolic evil requires one to consider the tactics they might use to create change. Put differently, being correct cannot come at the expense of the method. Rather than succumbing to ineffectual strategies such as snark (Kline, 2016), radical symbolic evil educators consider the form of their resistance as much as the intent, and how their resistance must be fluid (e.g., malleable given the situation) and creative. Part of this kind of approach can be to take up the position of what was construed as the object (not the subject), such as Baudrillard’s (1990) example of the rat who trained a psychologist to give it food (rather than a psychologist training a rat). In a social studies context, educators might engage with narratives in the margins (literally and figuratively), or present students with counterstories to destabilize metanarratives (Madden, 2019). Other strategies can include *hyperconformity* (i.e., adhering to the system in a way that breaks it), *illusion* (e.g., imagining other ways of being), and making what was once clear into an *enigma* (so as to stop and rethink what had been taken for granted). These strategies share the common characteristic of destabilizing, and thus helping to break, the system.

Resistance to symbolic evil can appear in two different ways: one as the maintenance of injustice through the status quo (e.g., doing nothing), and the other as actively seeking a reactionary vision to preserve and/or reinstate potentially harmful values, beliefs, and attitudes of a previous time. However, pursuing radical change in the midst of resistance to symbolic evil is complicated because radical change is sometimes viewed as evil; e.g., movements for radical change can be labelled as evil by those resistant to it. For example, Labelling Black Lives Matter (BLM) and anti-fascist groups (e.g., Antifa) as evil and falsely conflating them with neo-Nazis (Contiente, 2017) is one way resistance to symbolic evil has been enacted recently. As Pawlett (2014) aptly noted: “The great religious and political revolutionaries (Jesus, Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela) are clearly ‘Evil’ from the perspective of the system of law and order they challenge, and they are

punished accordingly” (§3, para. 1). Movements to thwart what might become radical change, especially in the face of removing physical manifestations of white supremacy, further serve to entrench white supremacy and protect it, which is why it is so essential to ensure that these reactionary movements are called out.

### *Radical Love and Radical Imagination*

Radical change requires not just the transformational actions of change that are required to restructure society, but also a dedication to a culture of praxis, which “brings together means and ends— reflection and action, theorizing and practice—creating spaces to work and think towards transformational ways of living together” (Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020, p. 1321). As bell hooks (1994/2006) asserted, “love as the ethical foundation” (p. 247) needs to undergird actions for justice, emphasizing that “[w]ithout an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism” (p. 243). In this way, radical love is “an ethical, social, political, cultural responsibility, and commitment to truth, to overcoming domination, oppression, and subordination” (Robinson-Morris, 2019, p. 27). Committing to a culture of praxis allows for a bold challenge to the status quo that ensures a commitment to radical change through attending to the needs of all people through the reimagining of the structure of society (Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020).

Radical love is profoundly needed to relationally and actively bring about individual and social changes that root out the violent policies and practices at the intersections of injustice and inequity. Engaging in radical love requires sustained and committed action: “To begin by thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility” (hooks, 2001, p. 13). This commitment entails “unwavering trust, and, in some contexts, a daring that defies current dominant reason” (Dotson, 2013, p. 38). In this way, we (the authors) see radical love as a positive force of symbolic evil.

Radical love can sustain individuals and communities as they not only desire change, but as they enact *radical imagination* by “envisioning transformational social change... [and] being bold about how re-imagining takes shape and visionary about what this future looks like” (Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020, p. 1323). From a standpoint of radical love, the imagined changes will also root out the problems at the heart of those resisting much needed changes: to “[envision] social change as steep, comprehensive and systemic—changing the practices and institutions themselves” (Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020, p. 1325). Without radical love and the commitment to a culture of praxis, it is not possible to discern actions that tap into symbolic evil toward a helpful end (vs. change that won’t help fight injustice), and without a full commitment, communities cannot truly begin dismantling systems of oppression in society.

## **Methods**

Because the conceptual framework focuses on actions educators might take in support of significant socio-political change toward justice, we wanted to discuss with participants both what changes toward justice they are trying to accomplish, what tactics they see as effective, and what experiences made them into the teachers they have become. The limitations of the Covid-19

pandemic meant that this study focussed solely on teachers' perspectives, but a future study that explores students' perspectives would be beneficial.

### *Participants*

This study consisted of five teachers (see Table 1) on Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 lands in the province of Alberta: two women, three men; four urban, one rural; four White, one Arab; four without visible religious garb, one Muslim in hijab. Participants had between three and twelve years of experience in mostly urban, public schools, but Melika worked in a rural context and Asmaa was employed at an independent (private) religious institution. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants chose their own pseudonyms.

In Alberta, "Social Studies" is an interdisciplinary course based in humanities and social sciences (rather than delineated courses in history, geography, civics, etc.), and is mandatory from kindergarten to grade twelve. All participants had experience teaching at the high school level (Grades 10-12) with the Alberta Program of Studies for Social Studies (Alberta Education, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c).

**Table 1**

#### *Participant Details*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Courses Taught</b>	<b>Self-Identifications</b>
<b>Asmaa</b>	28	5	School A	Urban Independent/Private Islamic school	Social Studies (Grades 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) English Language Arts (Grades 8, 9)	Muslim, Arab, woman, wears Hijab
<b>Freddie</b>	35	6	School B	Urban Public school focused on adults upgrading their high school credentials	Aboriginal Studies (Grades 10, 11, 12) Social Studies (Grades 10, 11, 12) English Language Arts (Grades 10, 11, 12)	Middle-class White male, Neurodivergent, educated
			School C	Urban Public high school	Canadian Studies English as a Second Language	
<b>Melika</b>	27	3	School D	Urban Public high school	Social Studies (Grades 9, 10, 11, 12)	Liberal-minded, young, White, woman
<b>Dan</b>	36	12	School E	Urban Public high school	Social Studies (Grades 10, 11, 12) Kindergarten Art (Grade 6) Science (Grade 11)	White male, straight, cisgender
			School F	Urban Independent school for Indigenous and other urban youth		
<b>H</b>	42	10	School G	Urban Public school	Humanities (Grade 9) Social Studies (Grades 10, 11, 12)	White, cisgender, male, settler

Participants were recruited through email via a Facebook group devoted to grassroots educational organizing. The authors selected potential participants from acquaintances who had at least an openness to what "radical change" and "justice" might mean (e.g., they had participated in justice-oriented actions or conversations, posted on social media in support of #BlackLivesMatter, #SchoolStrikeForClimate, etc.). We had aimed for five participants to keep this research project within the bounds of a summer research grant in support of undergraduate research, hoping for a rich discussion with a few exemplary teachers rather than engaging a large number of teachers at the surface-level and acquiring a large data set.

### *Procedure*

As part of the preparatory research, Avery identified content in secondary social studies curriculum (Grades 7-12) that students or teachers might label as a "radical change" in history (given that contemporary events are part of every grade level in secondary social studies). This initial step was important for the research team to gauge the extent to which radical change is included within curricular outcomes in Alberta. As a result, we narrowed this small study to high school (Grades 10-12) because there was more obvious content related to what might be considered as radical change.

After ethics board approval, Cathryn and Kennedy conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews (approximately 45 minutes each) over Zoom with each participant. An interview outline was used to ask initial questions, and the interviewers followed up with individualized questions based on participants' responses. The initial, pre-planned questions were: *What content have you taught that might be considered to be about radical change? In what ways are you seeking to fight injustice within and beyond your social studies class?* For the first question, we wondered about content that might reflect the concept of symbolic evil. From the concept of radical love, we wondered about the extent to which educators focussed on communities rather than individuals, in what ways these communities diverted or reversed the harmful status quo, and whether they were creating something new. The second question invited participants to consider the degree to which they saw themselves as agents of symbolic evil. The emphasis on action from symbolic evil and praxis from radical love led us to focus on participants' intentional tactics rather than simply their awareness.

Each interview began with a discussion of the participants' intersecting (Crenshaw, 1991) identities that they felt impacted their teaching of radical change (e.g., ethnoracial, gender, geographical, socio-economic, etc.). Follow-up questions varied according to participant responses; for example, one follow-up question to Dan was: *You said the word "imagination" and I wanted to probe you about that a little bit further. Is there a connection between imagination and radical change, or imagination and teaching about radical change?*

After feedback from a respected colleague, approximately six months after initial data collection, the authors decided to contact participants with a follow-up question: *How did you become an educator who teaches for radical change?* Although the tactics alone are worthy of merit in terms of better understanding participants' classroom pedagogy, learning of the lived experiences that participants attribute to their development as teachers for justice also has implications for research in teacher education.



## *Data Analysis*

Kennedy initiated the analysis and returned to each transcript several times to detect and discern patterns (i.e., similarities and differences) in understandings of what “radical change” means and what participants were trying to do in their classes in relation to radical change. The data from the two main questions worked in tandem: the tactics (Q2) used to teach particular content (Q1). To account for the tactics for the content expressed by participants, she employed a coding heuristic of processes (Saldaña, 2014); i.e., gerunds (“-ing” words that represent action) with an accompanying concept or curricular item (e.g., “linking x to y” or “thinking about x”). Specifically, she used limited dramaturgical codes, to reflect how “life [is] performance and its participants as characters in a social drama” (Saldaña, 2014, p. 28). Of the possible dramaturgical codes, Kennedy noted: *objectives* (i.e., what the participant wanted to come out of their teaching; e.g. greater understanding, considering other perspectives), *attitudes* (held by the participant, or their perception of those of students, parents, and/or administrators), *tactics* (i.e., methods used by the participant to achieve an objective), and *emotions* involved with their teaching of radical change (i.e., statements reflecting the emotions felt by the participant/ student/ parent/ administrator).

Cathryn and Kennedy revisited the data and draft analysis several times to enhance the credibility the findings. All of the authors then put this analysis into conversation with the theoretical framework and literature review. We did this task by focusing on the concepts the guided the study (symbolic evil, radical love, and radical imagination) while revisiting the analysis and the initial transcripts. This process resulted in deeper theoretical connections to the data. The final stage involved all authors reviewing the analysis to further refine the categories and narratives.

## *Limitations*

With only five participants, this study does not claim to capture a complete picture of the issue of teaching for radical change, but the findings contribute to an understanding about teaching for justice can look like in a classroom as well as some insights into factors that influenced these participants to teach about radical change (e.g., what were impactful experiences during their teacher education). Participants volunteered for a study about “radical change” and thus there is a bias toward teachers already committed to fighting injustice instead of teachers ambivalent or hesitant to embrace radical change. Because classroom observations were impossible due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the research team relied on teachers to report their tactics, rather than observing them ourselves.

## *Researcher Identities, Positionalities, and Commitments*

We recognize that our interpretations of participants’ utterances, to some extent, are shaped by our identities and positionalities as authors. Four of the five researchers are from an urban area, and so Cathryn, Kennedy, Rebeka, and Avery had to keep any assumptions about rural contexts in check. Four of the five authors are White settler women (Cathryn, Kennedy, Rebeka, and Kimberly), and Avery is a man who is a guest on the lands of Turtle Island identifying with two distinct ethnic groups: one of southeast Asian descent and one of European/Canadian descent. As such, all of us have a close proximity to white supremacy and the powers it gives to some, while denying them to others.

We recognize that confessing privileges is woefully inadequate if not considered with nuance and must be paired with genuine and ongoing action (Ahmed, 2006; Lensmire et al., 2013), and this research project is part of our action (and it is already shaping our teaching, advocacy, and further research). When designing the study, we tried to make ourselves aware that our assumptions about the status quo and our desired changes would be shaped by our individual experiences, and so we shaped the questioning to compensate (e.g., not imposing definitions or examples of “radical change”). We also were explicit with each other that we wanted to find participants from rural contexts and/or who were not only men with White racial identities, and that any White participants were aware of their position relative to the white supremacy that pervades Canadian society (and other societies). During the interviews, Cathryn and Kennedy were aware of a societal tendency for White women to impose themselves, and thus strove to be careful with follow-up questions to seek clarification instead of asking leading questions. Having said all this, there was only one participant that was not White, which says many things about us and beyond. It tells us that our online networks do not have an abundance of Asian, Black, Brown, and Indigenous teachers who trust us (and/or the research process) and who have the time and capacity for participation. Fighting for justice needs to take many forms for extended durations, and so we also acknowledge that we have much more work yet to do to divest from white supremacist settler colonialism (in all of its intersections with ableism, capitalism, the heteropatriarchy, and other forms of systemic violence).

## Findings

### *Conceptualizing Radical Change*

Despite some difficulties and differences in defining the word itself, participants nonetheless consistently saw decolonial and antiracist education as radical, as well as education for gender and sexual justice. In other words, participants thought about radical change through examples instead of adhering to a rigid definition. This reflects the concept of symbolic evil because it is a force of change and not a strict prescription or formula.

Although at times the three radical aims (decolonialism, antiracism, gender and sexual justice) need to be accounted for separately at times, participants viewed them as intimately intertwined; for example, Freddie shared that “*decolonization has to be the center point of radical change in Canada, no matter what lens we're looking at, no matter what sort of issues we're looking at.*” Often, participants conceptualized antiracist education as working alongside contemporary activist movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and Stop Asian Hate. Asmaa, Melika, and H all identified the women’s suffrage movement in North America in the early twentieth century as radical. Notably, Melika and H also distinguished the white suffragist movement from the voting rights for all women (Woyshner, 2002).

### *Tactics*

How do these educators attempt to teach for radical change in the midst of all the external constraints that teachers face? Participants described employing particular tactics, including: operationalizing positionality, supplementing curriculum, challenging assumptions, addressing emotionality, and subverting school rules.

**Operationalizing positionality.** Teacher positionality often affects what a teacher does in the classroom, and participants expressed how they operationalized their (real and perceived) attributes and contexts to creatively invite their students to consider contemporary radical changes. Asmaa explained that because she taught in an independent Islamic school, where most of her students were Muslim, she was positioned to engage with the occupation of Palestine as a contemporary example of Indigenous land dispossession in comparison with the settler colonial context of Canada. She explained how the beliefs and traumas of the students' families who came from the Middle East *“help them to relate to Indigenous peoples in Canada. So, I'm constantly being like ‘hey, you know those Palestinians? You know who else's land got stolen?’ and it helps transfer over.”* Engaging with the settler colonialism of Israel to understand settler colonialism in Canada is a strategy of symbolic evil in that it invites students to look at their own context in a fresh light—to reinsert thought into what was previously taken for granted.

Melika and her family's longstanding presence in their rural context influenced the way her students perceived her:

people have a preconceived notion that I am a conservative... which actually works in my favor. Then when I start introducing these [radical] things, they don't see it as a threat because they don't see me as a threat, they think that I'm coming from the same perspective as them.

In a way, Melika is engaging in a strategy of symbolic evil: Instead of a more standard critical approach (i.e., an informational critique), she is trying to avoid being absorbed into the status quo and instead is more subversive with her approach. Indeed, some educators use critical strategies effectively, for example when Freddie discussed his positionality as a White male with students *“as an identity foil”* and then also to *“recognize the power that my identity still holds, and I use those to deconstruct that with using myself in class, which is good because I don't have to pick on anyone else.”* Melika, on the other hand, chose to operate as an insider to move past the initial barriers students might put up if they think their teacher is not politically aligned with them. Such a tactic is different than openly discussing one's positionality, and is worthy of some consideration as new teachers wonder about the possibilities in their own classrooms.

Like Melika's tactic of building relationships with students, Dan also takes this approach. He relayed to us how he has come to understand students' resistance and how he sees his position as a White educator in mitigating that resistance by forming strong relationships with his students: *“earlier on in my career, I wanted to be right, and so I think I maybe silenced students by saying what was right in these situations. But what I've come to learn, over time, is that my relationship to students matters a lot... my responsibility is [to] hel[p] other White students come along and awaken to these realities and these truths that people face—that's what I signed up for.”* With this tactic, Dan embodies radical love. He holds his students accountable for troubling (or even hateful) things they might say, but from a place of care rather than using snark.

### *Supplementing Curriculum*

Mandated social studies curriculum itself can often be a tool of injustice if left uninterrogated (e.g., An, 2020; Sabzalian, 2019; Sabzalian et al., 2021; Shear et al., 2015). H explained to us a tactic he uses to acknowledge the shortcomings of the curriculum which *“doesn't have a lot of room to, at least on the surface, get into to alternative perspectives or marginalized*

*perspectives, so oftentimes what I'll do with the lesson is try to make sure that that gets presented in some way as well."*

Given this time-content constraint, Freddie explained how he finds uncommon ways to switch out commonly-taught British and Canadian examples for meaningful Indigenous ones. He compares *wahkohtowin*<sup>1</sup> "to social contracts and duties and responsibilities and things like that." Melika was similarly concerned about limited and fragmented incorporation (Donald, 2013) of Indigenous voices, and so she emphasized the importance of "trying to naturally weave Indigenous voices throughout almost every single lesson." Similarly, Melika discussed how the curriculum does not mandate much discussion about gender and sexuality beyond its impact on topics such as liberalism and thus she also went beyond the curriculum to include content about, and from the voices of, those with a variety of gender and sexual identities. Teachers can uplift issues and voices that are marginalized by white supremacist, settler colonial, capitalist, heteropatriarchal curriculum as a tactic of symbolic evil if they also pay attention to *how* one talks about a topic.

**Challenging assumptions.** All participants identified that challenging assumptions that are steeped in coloniality was another key tactic (Mignolo, 2012). Freddie, for example, observed that students unknowingly held attitudes that treated Eurocentric ideas as superior or standard compared to Indigenous ways of knowing. He relayed how:

students are often shocked to find out we are raised with the idea that freedom is the absolute highest ideal of any person... But what's shocking to a lot of people is that's not the case in the Cree worldview, [which] is you're born and meshed into a series of relationships and you are not free. You can choose to ignore those relationships if you want, but ... the highest ideal is almost duty, it's responsibility, to nurture those relationships, to be ethical.

This provocation illuminates Kumashiro's (2015) concept of "common sense" which compels students to recognize and situate their cultural worldview, and is one way of seeking to "engender meaningful alternatives" (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 334) to how many are thinking about rights and freedoms (and the limits thereof). Such shocks to thought are examples of symbolic evil at work and can illuminate opportunities to divert and reverse thinking and action. Freddie's discussion provided students with an invitation to relate to both humans and more-than-human entities differently. Other participants also challenged assumptions in relation to indigeneity, often as a pedagogical practice of thwarting harmful stereotypes, but not necessarily (e.g., Asmaa's comparisons with Palestinians, as discussed earlier in this article). Engaging with and centering not only Indigenous content but also worldviews and ways of knowing benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Bang et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2015).

### *Subverting School Rules*

Teaching about and for radical change involves both knowledge and action. As such, some participants actively thought about the injustice of school rules. Dan has been a longstanding advocate of abolishing rules about head coverings, a practice shown to reflect racial profiling (Huculak, 2020). Melika described how:

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<sup>1</sup> *wahkohtowin* is the Nehiyaw (Cree) natural law of reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility with other humans as well as all of existence, and thus is linked to ideas of community and kinship within and beyond the human (e.g., Wildcat, 2018).

I'm a huge feminist and so I'm like, "don't control women's bodies." I think it's hypocritical for me to be trying to enforce the dress code, when I myself don't believe in them.

Enforcing school rules (or not), such as a school dress code, are part of the educational experience in a school. This sort of praxis of radical love (e.g., Perhamus & Joldersma, 2020) is important to teaching *for* radical change, instead of merely teaching *about* it, and it is an example of anti-complicity in that it "actively resist[s] social harm in everyday life" (Zembylas, 2020, p. 318).

**Addressing emotionality.** All participants identified that building strong relationships and acknowledging emotions is part of addressing student resistance to content about urgently needed (and yet contested) radical socio-political changes, although Melika had a very strong focus on this emotional component. She provided us this example of how emotions connected to antiracism in education:

I've had a really good conversation with one kid, where he felt ... negative emotions anytime Indigenous people were being brought up. So, I sat down with him like, "okay let's talk about it, what experiences do you have, what are your inherent-what biases you have?" and he's like, "well mom and dad really hate them" and he started using some derogatory terms and stuff. I'm like, "okay, but what are your personal experiences?" So, when he couldn't come up with any, I'm like, "okay now how do we deal with this?... And let's try to just come at this a little more open-minded and you heard your parents' perspective, and that is a valid perspective for them. But let's talk about a valid perspective for you." So, then we went into World War One and I talked about Indigenous people volunteering to fight. He's like, "that's effed up, they were in residential schools, like, why do they have to fight?" I was like, "well they volunteered to," and he's like, "seriously?", like he just opened up in a way that I was not expecting.

Melika engaged with the emotional aspect of learning in a whole-class setting as well.

[students] have to reflect on what negative emotion they got from that lesson: Was it anxiety, was it anger, did they feel like they needed to be on their phone, did they feel like they needed to go to the bathroom more, did they feel like they were fidgeting more? So, I tell them that they have to be constantly aware of all of that at all times and then... they have to make note of it; it can be a tally sheet, it can be like a sentence or two, it can just be them writing down the emotions that they felt during that class or that fidgety-ness or whatever. When they have a lot of those, I meet with them at the end of each month and we look through them ... [and] we talk about: What was the underlying feeling with the content? And instead of getting them to just experiencing emotion and then we move on to the next thing the next day, I'm trying to really get them to engage with, "why am I feeling this and what does that say about me?"

Melika's tactics demonstrate the importance of educators acknowledging students' emotions when discussing topics that implicate them in social harm. Discussing emotions can subvert resistance and may help move conversations in justice-oriented directions. According to Zembylas (2020), the urgent question is: "How can I, as a teacher, move my students to take action in their everyday lives to refuse complicit in social harm?" (p. 326). Working with the affective space of the classroom, as Melika does, is part of the answer.

Returning to the quotation from bell hooks (1994/2006) from the conceptual framework, “[w]ithout an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism” (p. 243). Doing the hard work of caring for students who are wrestling their emotional responses is part of that loving ethic. For Melika, as a White woman, she took on this task by actively guiding White students through their defensive reactions so that they can focus on taking action against injustice in their everyday lives. For Dan in his context of a school with students of multiple racial identities, this ethic sometimes took the form of creating a space outside of class for students who feel the emotionality of such discussions not because they are the perpetrators, but because they are deeply personally affected. Dan explained how through the creation of his school’s Social Justice club, students could disclose their emotional experiences of antiracist education:

we had been having ... really important conversations around racism and, just like the basics, how does it work, how did it start, just these very interesting conversations, and there was a lot of tension in the room on the third day because some people were sitting in a lot of discomfort and other students in the class didn’t feel the conversation could go where it needed to go, specifically for these two Black students in the in the classroom, so they approached me after class and they were like “can we create a space after school because we would like to have a real conversation where we're not, where what we're saying is not going to be, like White folks aren’t going to react to it in a way that it's a safe place for us”, and so I said sure, and essentially was the start of the Social Justice club.

As educators seeking justice, Melika and Dan saw part of their role as creating environments that allowed students to explore their emotions and contentious issues.

### *What Makes an Educator for Radical Change?*

As a follow-up to the original study, the research team asked participants how they came to be teachers who educate for socio-political changes for justice. There were some common themes but the particularities for each participant were unique. Common themes were:

- a realization from personal experiences that classrooms can and should be spaces for justice,
- examples during their teacher education of what spaces for justice might look like,
- helpful provocations from media (e.g., books, music), and
- non-traditional teaching experience.

What follows are vignettes from each participant to illustrate their understanding of their journey.

For Freddie, he feels that his experiences in post-secondary education had a significant impact on his teaching. He developed “*a strongly Marxist/critical perspective on society*” (e.g., Gramsci’s cultural hegemony) with a commitment to praxis along the vein of Freire. What took those ideas to the next level was his exposure to “*Indigenous ways of knowing, including radical ways of knowing that expressly reject Marxism as still being a product of the worldview that gave rise to colonialism.*”

Asmaa was heavily influenced by her experiences of being a woman as well as visibly Muslim (e.g., due to her hijab), and how her “*sense of being ‘othered’ made [her] think constantly about*

*all the other people who had also been marginalized, whether that was the result of religion, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, etc.*” Her educational experiences were also an important factor, although from negative, what-not-to-do situations:

Again, being Muslim and being a woman ... made me feel like I was adhering to an entirely different set of rules and expectations than many of my educators ... [who] didn't understand my worldview and didn't care to include my lens.

Given these experiences, Asmaa seeks to “provide a space where all of my students recognize themselves in my teaching, and feel seen and embraced by me and the curriculum we work through.” Her negative experiences inspired her to prevent her own students from what she was forced to endure.

H, unlike Asmaa, had to seek out knowledge about experiences of exclusion and injustice, which came as part of his shift from being a content-focused teacher to one who values relationships above all else. His background hid injustice from him, and it was music (especially punk rock music) that opened his eyes to the need for justice in the world. Lyrics by his favorite bands “*got me thinking about, well, how could the world be different and why can't I be thinking about these things?*” He then built upon this foundation by living and teaching in South Korea, which helped him see a different perspective (i.e., breaking his common sense; Kumashiro, 2015). Such experiences allowed him to develop the disposition to sit with emerging social movements such as Black Lives Matter and seek out perspectives beyond his own. Also, H knew he had to respond to students. He went through a “*trial and error*” process in his early career as a teacher and he came to realize that a content-based (instead of a relationship-centered) approach led to disengaged students. Instead of adhering to preconceived notions of what a teacher ought to be, he learned to “*be myself*” and create environments where students feel valued and comfortable.

Like Asmaa, H was influenced by how teachers treated him as a student, and he was reminded of how he remembered relationships more so than content. Part of the task of building relationships is taking good care of one's self, the students, and one's colleagues in the spirit of radical love, as well as swinging the pendulum from cynicism “*towards hope, and just remember that sometimes what we're doing is just really small changes.*” As final thought, H noted how relationships with other critical educators has helped him—a local group dedicated to uplifting teachers educating for justice has given him not only ideas for his classroom, but also the strength to keep going, especially given that he sees improving his educational practices as a career-long journey to “*learn from the past and become a better version of myself in the present.*”

Melika described how the stereotype of growing up in a conservative rural town might lead one to assume a lack of justice-oriented values. Although she noted that her hometown does indeed have problems with racism, she also noted the as good work happening that influenced her. These good works included a transfer program with a small town in Tanzania that felt more like a partnership than neocolonialism. Like H's experiences teaching abroad, this program gave Melika and her community members an opportunity to explore different perspectives (especially when the mayor from the town in Tanzania visited). Similarly, the town took in refugees after Chernobyl, among other deeds that taught her that it was “*normalized to help other communities.*” She carried this experience forward in her teaching, where she supports students who take initiative, such as a student who recently fundraised and then cooked food for those currently in need. Melika helped the student navigate the bureaucracy (e.g., legal aspects such as standards for packaging), but

otherwise the student led the initiative. In the process, the student also learned about careers related to community work.

Melika was also influenced by her parents where (despite stereotypes of conservatives) they were “open to debate in a very healthy way, so I was always allowed to disagree with my parents as long as I’m able to come up with my own reasons as to why.” These experiences also impacted her attitude as a teacher, and Melika feels that seeing such an approach (i.e., healthy disobedience to authority) would make a difference in teacher education. She also found it helpful to know the curriculum well so that she can accommodate student needs and interests. Her ability to make, say, students’ concerns about a particular injustice link to the prescribed curriculum allows her to both meet her obligations and teach for justice in a student-centred way. This relative freedom was further bolstered by reduced high-stakes standardized testing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The more freedom she had to breathe, the more Melika could do with her students “to encourage more activism within a classroom and encourage more [of] that creative energy and spirit.” Her teaching for justice was also impacted by her practicum experience. One of her placements was at a high school for pregnant and/or parenting young women. This non-traditional setting offered Melika a perspective on a schooling environment that responded directly to student needs.

Dan had “*a lot of adversarial relationships with teachers*” growing up—he saw injustice and wanted to do something about it (e.g., carceral logics in schools), but “*did not have the language to name what was wrong in the education system.*” He did know that school would be “*a better place if you had teachers who actually cared about kids*” and he wanted to be that kind of teacher. He didn’t fully realize that he could, though, until he experienced a teacher educator who shattered his perception of the norm.

This educator at Dan’s teachers’ college had tattoos, a skateboard, and a hat—not to mention an unwavering dedication to justice. Dan finally encountered the sort of teacher he wanted to be, and through course readings (e.g., Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*, and Howard Zinn’s *People’s History*) he developed the language to talk and think about “*how do we create something new, how do we challenge the system of education and the paradigms of teaching and learning?*” He felt that having a good foundation was then a gateway into more learning, especially given that this teacher educator encouraged humility, that it was okay not to be an expert but to muddle through and learn more. This ethos, then, allowed Dan to respond to the students he taught, especially those constantly undermined by the schooling system and society more broadly.

To that end, like Melika, teaching at a non-traditional school opened his eyes further. For Dan, a high school for Indigenous and other urban youth who have, or are, experiencing houselessness made him re-evaluate his curricular and pedagogical goals. He drew from what he knew from hooks and Freire to see the brilliance in these students (rather than a deficit logic due to their circumstances), and with students he co-created different understandings of the world and “*who they are within that world.*” Just because these students “*are struggling, doesn’t mean they don’t have some opinions on what’s going on.*” He then made sure that (as much as possible) students had opportunities to articulate their brilliance in a modality that worked for them, be that writing, art, music, or whatever. Notably, this school was not constrained by high-stakes standardized tests, which allowed Dan more freedom for multiple modes of expression that some others might have (and Melika in her interview noted the power of that freedom during the Covid-19 pandemic when Grade 12 provincial exams were canceled, optional, or with reduced stakes).



The more that assessment can be a conversation rather than a judgment, the more opportunities there are for learning. Overall, because of his experiences Dan sees good education as healing:

how we're healing not just like the students who struggle with school, but how like everybody's relationship to learning within an educational system that is incredibly Eurocentric, perpetuates oppression, and is really about controlling and compliance and obedience a lot of the time.

Learning together through community is what is educational about education, and Dan was able to experience that in his teacher education program and then carry that over into his own teaching. And he felt supported in that work by a community he became part of—talking with other educators about injustice and what he might do about it in schools (and beyond).

## **Discussion**

The Alberta Program of Studies for Social Studies at the high school level offers a few starting points to discuss radical changes, with many invitations to consider power, community and perspective. The teachers participating in this research project saw the openings in the curriculum for more opportunities to teach for justice. Melika noted how social studies curriculum can often “*limit the value of Indigenous knowledge and making it so we can't effectively weave it in.*” This finding aligns with what is known from surveys in U.S. state standards (Sabzalian et al., 2021; Shear et al., 2015), and holds true for other groups whose presence is often misrepresented or even omitted entirely, such as Asian Americans (Ah, 2020). As Saleh (2021) aptly stated: “We need to live a story that replaces ‘common sense’, liberalistic, additive (and yet simultaneously reductive) narrativizations of the need to humanize Others with our *relational commitments and responsibilities to and with each other*” (p. 214).

Participants' engagement with Indigenous content and methods links to symbolic evil and radical love. Participants sought creative, often community-based ways to counter institutional colonialism and a settler colonial mindset; for example, Freddie's teaching about rights and freedoms through the concept of *wahkohtowin*. Such a strategy is more than simply incorporating a non-dominant perspective: It thoughtfully flips the object position (Baudrillard, 1983/1990) of a taken-for-granted common sense (Kumashiro, 2015). The teachers used their curricular experience to find openings for increased Indigenous-oriented education. Saleh (2021) urges educators to attune themselves to the complexities of people, cultures, and their stories, and participants in this study found ways to bring humanity into dominant discourse (rather than to attempt glibly to humanize supposed “others”).

Recognizing the emotionality of teaching and learning was a key tactic, which is generally overlooked in social studies, despite excellent work by scholars like Garrett (2017) and Sheppard et al. (2015). Unique to Melika's tactic is how she actively teaches students about their emotions and defenses, and provides students with the opportunity to work through them. Emotions play an important role alongside information and pedagogical procedures, especially with urgent social issues like the rise of right-wing populism (e.g., Zembylas, 2021). Participants spoke powerfully to how emotionally-informed experiences in and out of the classroom helped them teach toward justice, and some participants even spoke to scaffolding emotional learning as part of their pedagogy. Much more work needs to be done in teacher education regarding the emotions of both those who might thoughtlessly perpetuate injustice and those for whom teaching for justice ought to benefit (e.g., Blackwell, 2010). With a nuanced attentiveness to emotionality, an ethic of radical

love (e.g., hooks, 2001)—how people can hold each other accountable in good ways—might more easily permeate a classroom.

### *Implications for Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Education*

In the follow-up interviews, all participants emphasized the significance of their pre-service teacher education in preparing them for teaching about and for radical change. One implication of this study regarding social studies teacher education is the value in admission systems that draw on experiences; e.g., Emdin's (2016) call for the recruitment of those who function as community educators.

Once admitted to a teacher education program, pre-service teachers benefit from specific courses and inspiring instructors who understand and embody teaching for justice, and this benefit would also apply to in-service teacher education and professional development. Dan was highly affected by the course material by an exemplary educator, and similarly Freddie noted the power of mandatory courses that challenged the dominant colonial narratives, such as the Indigenous education courses at institutions like the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia. Asmaa noted in our follow-up questionnaire that as a Muslim woman, she felt as though some instructors did not “understand [her] worldview” and “didn't care to include [her] lens when exploring big topics.” This awareness came from the stark contrast between her identity and her instructors. On the other hand, Dan had a professor who came in with “tattoos everywhere, a skateboard over his shoulder, and a hat” who he shared common interests with. Dan remarked that this professor “changed [his] life” with his ability to build relationships with his students and the material he presented. Dan's professor was able to establish relationships and rapport with his pre-service teachers and had the theoretical background to teach about and for radical change, which Dan cites as a reason he is the educator he is today. For both pre-service and in-service teacher education, identities and commitments matter.

A significant time of learning and growth occurs for teachers during their field experiences. Field experiences provide student teachers with the opportunity to apply theory to their practice and the experience they encounter critically shapes their pedagogical practice throughout their careers. Both Dan and Melika were heavily influenced by their experience in non-traditional school settings, and a valuable extension of this study would be to assess if these non-traditional spaces often lead to similarly positive outcomes.

A continuing necessary support for pre- and in-service teachers alike are safe, honest spaces to debrief and discuss challenging experiences as a community, and these spaces can be formal or informal. Teachers who are able to express vulnerability to each other and experience support in their communities are more open to being challenged and critically analyzing the dominant structures in place. As well, empowering teachers to question the way things are allows them to understand how to cultivate similar experiences for their students to engage in learning in a meaningful way. While educators strive to build relationships with students to invite them to learn, pre-service education and professional development necessitates a similar level of relationship building and various invitations to give teachers a way to learn about radical change in a way that implicates them.

## Concluding Remarks

The educators who participated in this study offered some helpful insights into teaching for justice in the current moment. Because of the small sample size, generalizations cannot be made, but rather these teachers offer some insights into possibilities for teaching in support of much-needed socio-political change. The questions were open-ended, but all participants gravitated toward decolonial and antiracist education as well as teaching for gender and sexual equality and justice. Participants revealed how they are thinking about urgently-needed radical socio-political shifts in a few different contexts: urban and rural public schools as well as an independent Islamic school. Their identities situated in their school contexts revealed some intriguing possibilities for teaching against injustice.

This small-scale study adds to existing research in social studies about pedagogical strategies employed by teachers (e.g., Busey & Walker, 2017; Parkhouse, 2018) with an explicit focus on tactics in different schooling contexts (e.g., a rural public school, a private Islamic school) in Canada. Symbolic evil in conversation with radical love and imagination is a unique conceptual framework that frames such tactics in a (radically) different way.

Many educators are seeking to teach toward a world that hurts less, and those interviewed for this study shared insights to that end. Their tactics are particularly educative for pre-service and in-service teacher training. Moyer and colleagues (2001) found that successful social movements required awareness and critical questioning to challenge the status quo until a critical mass is reached (and then policies are altered), and so social studies education can play a significant role in those larval stages of (potential) social change.

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