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Media literacy education and teacher confidence in addressing violent extremism: a longitudinal professional development study

Renee Hobbs[a], Kent Lenci[b], John Palella[c] and Benjamin Thevenin[d]

[a]Harington School of Communication and Media, Department of Communication Studies, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI, USA; [b]Middleground Schools, LLC Massachusetts, USA; [c]Department of Education, Brown University, Providence RI, USA; [d]Department of Media, Career Studies and Leadership Development, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Political polarization and online extremism pose new challenges for educators committed to peace education, yet little is known about how teachers build the confidence to use media literacy education (MLE) to address them. This mixed-method longitudinal case study followed 54 K– 12 and college educators (who collectively reached over 10,000 students) across three waves of data collection spanning the nine months after a 10-hour professional development program. Educators showed statistically significant gains in confidence across MLE's core pedagogies: media analysis, dialogue and discussion, and creative expression. Most sustained these practices nine months later, though only one in five continued teaching violent extremism directly, gravitating instead toward adjacent themes such as disinformation and civic responsibility. Findings highlight modeling dialogic practice, peer collaboration, and teacher agency as keys to sustainable MLE integration.

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Media literacy education; peace education; teacher confidence; violent extremism prevention; professional development; political polarization

A growing number of people in the United States and around the world now believe that political violence against the government is a way of making effective and rapid change. Economic grievances, distrust of political institutions, and perceptions regarding social and demographic changes in the U.S. are intensifying and deepening feelings of fear and hatred (Piazza 2023). Digital platforms and systems are also increasing public anxieties, as a growing number of people are engaging in media usage that facilitates and reinforces affective polarization (Elwood 2024). The social media environment is now replete with people shouting at each other or reaffirming hateful diatribes, as volatile discourses are amplified on television, YouTube, in journalism, on podcasts, and through social media. Violent rhetoric and sentiment get more visibility because echo chambers, hyperpartisan narratives, and individually tailored algorithms can contribute to the radicalization of individuals who support political violence (Stone 2023). Researchers have found that the

CONTACT Renee Hobbs hobbs@uri.edu

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use of social media combines with disinformation beliefs to increase cynicism about civic and social institutions, which leads to support for violence (Jankowicz 2020; Koo et al. 2025).

Critical peace education uses a critical cultural perspective to explore the media's many symbolic systems. This begins with an exploration of the role of identity and culture in real life, followed by challenging the notion of identity/culture as categories for describing the world, using collaborative processes that interrogate and dismantle narrow and limiting categories, and exploring collaborative efforts that contribute to social change (Zembylas and Bekerman 2013).

Often overlooked is the role of curriculum and pedagogy in preventing violent extremism, hate crimes, and other school-based violence (Duckworth 2024). Peace education can be focused on the development of people's capacities for using the power of dialogue to address the many forms of violence in the world today. Not only can the dialogic stance foster community and constructive discourse in classrooms, it also offers a philosophical justification for peace education as a civic duty necessary for democratic legitimacy and global justice (Snauwaert 2020).

Although the dramatic increase of digital content, disinformation, and propaganda has left many people uncertain about whom and what to trust, it has also created opportunities to advance media literacy as a whole-of-society approach to address broader social issues such as white supremacy, systemic racism, domestic terrorism, police reform, and gun control (Doxsee and Harrington 2021). Because it is responsive to issues of social justice, media literacy education (MLE) has been on the rise locally, nationally, and internationally and the concept is also rapidly evolving in response to changes in the media ecosystem like the rise of generative AI (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2025). As Bulger and Davidson (2018, 2) put it, 'Media literacy has become a center of gravity for countering fake news, and a diverse array of stakeholders – from educators to legislators, philanthropists to technologists – have pushed significant resources toward media literacy programs.' The result has been a robust evidence base that demonstrates the value of MLE experiences in a wide range of specific educational contexts, affecting the lives of children, teens, teachers, parents, and other adults (Cho, Carpenter, and Li 2025).

But much less is known about how K-12 teachers learn to implement the pedagogy and practice of MLE in schools, especially in response to growing levels of political polarization and political violence in an increasingly fragmented, algorithmically curated media ecosystem (Haider and Sundin 2022; Lenci 2023). In this research, we report findings from a professional development program designed to increase educator confidence in applying MLE's instructional practices to civic education and more specifically, to address the problem of violent extremism, polarization, and radicalization to violence. As we will show in this paper, professional development programs that use the power of dialogue and discussion to address the problem of violent extremism can increase educators' confidence in applying media literacy in the classroom, contributing to a potentially meaningful impact on peace education in practice.

Literature review

Critical peace education and pedagogical responses to political violence

Peace education relies on a diverse set of philosophical and pedagogical foundations to address various forms of conflict and violence, including physical harm, entrenched inequalities and social hierarchies, and cultural violence, where media and communication is used to justify or legitimize violenceBecause respect for the equality of all human beings transcends national boundaries, peace education prepares citizens through critical thinking, independent inquiry, and tolerance, using a dialogical process where teachers and students co-construct their learning experiences and help all participants value relational change and the recognition of multiple perspectives (Bajaj 2015). Critical peace education also identifies and challenges asymmetrical power relationships, inviting educators and students to recognize and critique how the world is designed by addressing the whole human being: cognitive knowledge (head), emotional competence (heart), physical well-being (body), and spiritual depth (soul). Arts-based methods, performances, and explorations of empathy can provoke such transrational reflection (Snauwaert 2020).

When cognitive skills including critical thinking and problem solving are combined with affective skills including the development of agency, empathy, and positive self-esteem, it is possible to build a culture of peace within a school community (Duckworth 2024). For example, after the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001, U.S.-based educators began using MLE activities to help students analyze the changing media environment, where increasingly patriotic motifs and us-vs-them framing were among the ways that politicians and the mass media responded to the 'war on terrorism.' Teachers developed lessons including critical analysis of news, questioning inaccurate representations, and even a dialogue and discussion activity where students addressed the question, 'Why do they hate us?' (Steinbrink and Cook 2003).

One large-scale study of high school students in Quebec, Canada, found that school unsafety is associated with more support for violent radicalization, as it represents another form of social adversity that can contribute to feelings of injustice and legitimization of violence (Miconi et al. 2025). A systematic literature review on preventing violent extremism among young people showed that media literacy is commonly identified to help youth learn how to analyze information and ideas and resist the persuasive force of extreme ideas that simplify ideologies into 'us vs them' and 'good and evil' frameworks (Nash et al. 2017).

Another significant component of preventing violent extremism is the power of open political debate and discussion, which can help address the ethical, moral and pedagogical challenges that terrorism education embodies (Sjøen 2021). Helping students and teachers balance civility, disagreement, and conflict enable people to thrive in a pluralist society. The creation of safe spaces where youth can examine and debate current events and other concerns without fear can promote learner confidence and creative expression that helps build a sense of personal, social, and political identity (Thevenin 2022). Together, these instructional practices are thought to build resilience, a concept which can suggest the ability to adjust or modify one's perspective in response to stress and trauma or stand up to injustice and work for social change (Amit and Kafy 2022).

There are certainly challenges associated with teaching about the representation of terrorism in literature, film, and other media. Although terrorism has become a familiar trope in books, movies, and TV shows, turning depictions of violence and suffering into entertainment, even the attempt to define terrorism is a highly contested exercise. Martin (2011, 457) describes teaching about representations of terrorism as a form of constructive defamiliarization that questions the political, economic, historical, cultural, and personal aspects of terrorist attacks, noting that pedagogy can help to challenge 'convenient binaries.' By posing critical questions about the media that unsettle and challenge students, 'teachers offer models of how to conduct analysis while the ground shifts underfoot, how to craft political arguments, how to apply past histories to current circumstances' (Rich 2004, 113).

MLE has also been used as a pedagogical strategy to support young people's critical understanding of news media representations of racialized minority groups. Media literacy is a potentially powerful tool to challenge the symbolic violence that is found in media representations of immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others designated as 'other.' Analysis of media representations of migrants in the United States and Mexico reveals patterns that reflect the specific characteristics of each country's media system. In the United States, the arrival of Central Americans is portrayed as a chaotic situation that overwhelmed the immigration system, while Mexican news media depicts migrants as victims of human rights violations (Severino and Salas 2022). Ranieri and Fabbro (2016) found that classroom-based interventions dealing with representations of discriminated groups can be designed to support broader acts of democratic citizenship, helping youth to question discrimination in media representations. More recently, a media literacy project that introduced digital activism to college students was shown to foster ethnocultural empathy and students' belief in their ability to make positive social change (Khan, Perren, and Quintanilla 2024)

Lastly, researchers have been optimistic about the potential of media literacy to enhance both civic participation (Hobbs 2010) and youth citizen engagement (Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013). Media literacy is often conceptualized as a way to nurture the 'life skills that are necessary for full participation … in society,' including the ability to make more responsible choices by comprehending information and ideas, creating content in a variety of forms, reflecting responsibly on one's own conduct and communication behaviour, and working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems (Hobbs 2010, vii – viii). Recent research in media literacy has examined the potential for education to nurture young people's media abilities and, in so doing, encourage civic participation (Römer, Supa, and Hodboď 2023). There is a substantial body of evidence that shows that when youth and adults seek out information and participate in discussions online, there is an increase in their overall levels of civic actions (Kahne and Bowyer 2019). For example, a national survey of Australian adults examined how media participation is related to civic engagement, finding that the more active people are online, interacting with content or other people, the more likely they are to be engaged in civic activities. The research showed that people with higher levels of confidence in their media abilities are more likely to participate in civic activities (Park et al. 2023).

Teacher professional development and instructional confidence

To effectively equip students to challenge cultures of violence, advocate for peace, and engage critically in media discourse, teachers benefit from professional development that supports the implementation of pedagogical approaches grounded in peace education and media literacy frameworks. In peace education, professional development (PD) is used to equip teachers with the beliefs, practical skills, and self-awareness to transform their classrooms into spaces that cultivate student agency for social change. Significantly, this occurs through helping teachers develop a dialogic stance that should suffuse all aspects of teaching and learning across all grade levels and content areas. Methods such as communication agreements, active listening, and open-ended questions enable learners themselves to navigate the dynamics of social interaction in ways that can activate critical awareness of social inequalities and foster a commitment to collective action, enabling trust and empathy to emerge (Ross 2025).

In MLE, however, most of the momentum for PD programs for K-12 educators revolves around one primary concern: judging the accuracy, credibility, and veracity of news and information. This is occurring because of widespread cultural fear about so-called 'fake news' and people's inability to accurately judge truth claims tied to controversial public issues. As Monsees (2020) has explained, a focus on 'fake news' is key not only because of its impact on elections, but in the way the topic 'rekindles related debates about social media, regulation of free-speech and threats to democracy' (118). In an experiment embedded within a large, nationally representative survey of U.S.-based youth ages 15 to 27, participants were asked to judge the accuracy of one of several simulated online posts. As expected, young people evaluated the accuracy of content by considering how it aligns with their existing beliefs. Importantly, those with previous exposure to MLE were better able to identify inaccurate content even when it aligned with their existing beliefs. Although youth's level of political knowledge did not improve judgments of accuracy, exposure to MLE did (Kahne and Bowyer 2017, 2019).

To counter the threats to truthfulness posed by fake news, educators must foster character traits that involve a love and desire for the truth. But these traits are not innate or even easily acquired in a short lesson. They are intellectual virtues that need to be cultivated (Bernecker et al. 2021) Peace educators believe that it is important to acknowledge how "faith in technological positivism and the uncertainty of posttruth politics" may also affect how students and scholars engage in this work (Kester, Archer and Bryant 2019, p. 291).

Still little is known about the forms of PD that build educators' own confidence in applying media literacy instructional practices in the classroom. Lack of confidence may explain why some studies have shown that when teaching analysis and evaluation skills, social studies teachers make quite different instructional choices, even when they receive the same PD learning experiences. For example, a study of high school social studies teachers in one U.S. school who implemented lessons in lateral reading revealed that teachers' differing goals influenced their pedagogical decisions. While some teachers wanted students to focus on gaining historical content knowledge, others wanted students to extend historical thinking to a new context by examining contemporary sources found on the internet. Although teachers in this study were provided with the same PD and the same lesson plans, they took their instruction in different directions (Reynolds

2025). For this reason, PD experiences that help build teacher confidence to address the problem of terrorism and targeted violence should give teachers plentiful opportunities to use dialogue and discussion, which can help them center curricular goals in relation to media literacy and peace education.

In this study, we pose the following research question: How does participation in a media literacy PD program on the topic of the media's role in addressing the problem of violent extremism affect educators' confidence, instructional strategies, and willingness to use MLE's core instructional practices into the classroom?

Research methods

Our team, based in the United States, designed and implemented a 10-hour professional development program, working collaboratively to demonstrate how media literacy and active listening could be used to reduce the fear and hate that leads to violence. We modeled learning activities that activate critical thinking about media, active listening, kindness and compassion, and community engagement. Participants were K12 and college educators, including teacher educators, primarily within U.S. contexts, who were responsible for developing their own original lesson plans, building on what they learned in the program. We showcased many of these completed works in an online webinar event, which enabled participants to share and discuss their insights with peers.

Program content and format

The Courageous Rhode Island Professional Development program included six online learning sessions and four hours of independent work. A mix of synchronous and asynchronous content and activities was presented using a blend of real-time (synchronous via Zoom) and anytime (asynchronous via the Media Education Lab's Pathwright Learning Management System) learning experiences. The program was held from September to December of 2023. All sessions featured a short lecture component and a structured discussion activity where six to eight educators gathered in small groups. Participants also completed reading, viewing, and discussion activities that helped them synthesize their learning. They completed a final assignment that required them to create an original lesson plan for their own students, applying what was learned in the program.

Research design

This mixed method longitudinal case study uses description and data to document the implementation and impact of a media literacy PD program for K-12 and college educators. The program focused on preventing violent extremism and data was collected in three waves. In Wave 1, surveys were administered immediately before and after each program session, and qualitative data (including transcripts of spoken language and chat history) was also collected during online synchronous sessions. In Wave 2, educators completed surveys before the program began (September) and four months later after the program was completed (December). In Wave 3, educators completed a delayed posttest survey a full nine months after the program was completed to measure the program's lasting impact on pedagogy and practice.

Longitudinal studies track how phenomena evolve over extended periods, providing insights into patterns of change and development that are impossible to obtain with single-point-in-time cross-sectional data. Because case studies of professional development programs are high in authenticity, the validity and relevance of the research findings is noteworthy. The research protocols for this program were reviewed and approved by the first author's university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Context and background

This professional development program was designed and implemented at a time when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under the Biden administration was making domestic terrorism prevention a central priority, framing it as the most persistent and lethal terrorism-related threat facing the country (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, ND). In June 2021, the Biden administration launched the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, which represented the first time such a national strategy was implemented in U.S. history (Doxsee and Harrington 2021). It directed the federal government not only to disrupt and deter violent plots but also to address the underlying factors that draw people toward violence. A defining feature of this approach was its explicit 'whole-of-society' framing (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2024b). Countering domestic terrorism could not be the job of government, law enforcement, or social media companies alone. It required the participation of educators, mental health providers, faith and community leaders, local governments, nonprofits, and families. Since radicalization to violence often begins long before someone comes to the attention of authorities, the people who are best positioned to notice warning signs and offer off-ramps are those closest to the individual. Localized early interventions by teachers, parents, and community members can reduce the conditions in which hate and grievance escalate into violence (National Institute of Justice 2023).

Within this framework, media literacy and digital/information literacy were recognized as core prevention tools rather than peripheral education efforts. DHS explicitly identified the goal of improving 'community and individual resilience to violence and disinformation, including through digital and information literacy' (Doxsee and Harrington 2021). The reasoning was that much contemporary radicalization is fueled by online disinformation, conspiracy theories, manipulated narratives, and extremist propaganda that exploit fear and resentment. If individuals could be equipped to critically evaluate the information they encounter, recognize manipulation, and resist dehumanizing narratives, they would be less susceptible to the recruitment and mobilization tactics used by violent extremists. This vision was operationalized largely through CP3's Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program, which distributed roughly $20 million annually to dozens of state and local governments, universities, and nonprofit organizations, with a meaningful share supporting media and digital literacy initiatives. For example, the Invent2Prevent program engaged university and high school students to design prevention projects, including online toolkits and interactive modules specifically to strengthen media literacy and online critical thinking among students, educators, and concerned adults (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2024a). Another DHS funded program called Op250, developed by Tyler Cote, offered lessons designed to help students recognize unsafe online behaviors, consider the psychology of online decision

making, and learn how hate and hostile out-group communication behavior creates risks and threats (Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention 2021). To prevent domestic terrorism, MLE can be useful in empowering people with knowledge and skills that may be more effective than surveillance or after-the-fact prosecution.

However, it is worth noting that media-literacy-as-prevention was a strategy that was politically contested. Critics characterized it as government overreach that could blur into policing lawful speech and political viewpoints, raising concerns about how disinformation was defined and who decided (Judicial Watch 2022). During the time we developed our project, Nina Jankowicz, Russian disinformation specialist and author of *How to Lose the Information War* (2020), was appointed as executive director of the newly created Disinformation Governance Board at DHS. Faced with intense criticism from conservatives who believed DHS was aiming to create Big Brother Thought Control Ministry of Truth, she resigned from the position after just three weeks as the board was dismantled (Fung 2022). DHS, for its part, maintained that the work was viewpoint-neutral, focused on the behavioral pathways to violence rather than on partisan beliefs, and grounded in a public health prevention model. The tension between treating media literacy as a protective civic skill and concerns about government involvement in controlling speech remained a live debate until the election of President Donald J. Trump to a second term in 2024, when he issued an executive order (U.S. White House 2025) that dismantled federal programs and partnerships that were designed to combat misinformation or disinformation and prevented the U.S. government from pressuring social media platforms to moderate potentially dangerous content.

Faculty positionality

Our personal and professional identities shaped the choices we made in implementing this program. Faculty members identify themselves as (1) a media literacy expert who is a college professor and author; (2) the director of a social studies teacher education program; (3) a former social studies teacher and author; and (4) a college professor with expertise in youth media.

Author 1 is a white female living in the Northeast United States with more than 30 years of teaching and research experience. As a result of her education and experience, she identifies as an insider on the topic of media literacy, professional development, and research, but an outsider on violent extremism and political polarization. She is a registered Democrat and identifies as moderate to progressive, a positionality that influenced the design and development of this study by foregrounding the importance of modelling instructional practices that activate civic engagement and participation.

Author 2 is awhite male living in the Northeast United States. The bulk of his professional experience has been teaching middle school social studies, although for the past five years he has worked to bridge political differences. He considers himself an outsider when it comes to media literacy research but an insider regarding K-12 education and political polarization. This positionality influenced the study's emphasis on bridging political differences and questioning the misperceptions many people hold about the political 'others.'

Author 3 is a multiethnic gay man with nearly 25 years of K-12 teaching experience and more than 15 years of work in educational research and higher education. He is a social

studies teacher and a teacher educator in an M.A.T. program and brings expertise in public relations and speech communication. He is also a historian of race, gender, sexuality, and media. His scholarly and pedagogical commitments are grounded in the power of storytelling as a vehicle for understanding identity, building community, and advancing equity. His positionality as a queer scholar with an ambiguous ethnic identity shapes how he engages questions of teacher confidence, civic courage, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. This lens influenced the study's emphasis on dialogic and creative instructional practices that help educators navigate complex topics like political violence, media manipulation, and civic identity with pedagogical clarity and cultural responsiveness.

Author 4 is ascholar and teacher located in the Southeast United States who studies the relationship between youth, media, and civic engagement, seeking to prepare young people to become thoughtful citizens, consumers, and creators of media. He teaches classes on creativity, children's culture, emerging media, and media literacy and identifies as a creative individual with a particular interest in popular culture. Although he is not ateacher educator, he seeks out opportunities to help K-12 teachers use creative expression practices with children and young people.

Sample

A diverse group of secondary and college faculty participants were recruited using email and social media with the help of the Media Education Lab and the University of Rhode Island. We received 142 applications in the early fall of 2023 and selected 54 middle school, high school and college faculty from Rhode Island and across the United States, and 48 completed the program. Collectively, these educators reached 10,278 students during the 2023–2024 school year.

Of the 54 participants who were selected, more than three quarters were classroom teachers employed as middle school teachers (26%) or high school teachers (54%). Some participants taught at both the secondary and college level. One in three identified as college teachers (31%). Three percent of participants specialized in pre-service teacher education. Most identified as White (85%), 12% identified as Hispanic, and 3% identified as African American. Participants ranged in age, including 25–33-year-olds (10% of the sample), 34–44-year-olds (38% of the sample), 45–54-year-olds (31% of the sample), 55–64-year-olds (18% of the sample), and 65+ (3% of the sample).

We also sought to ensure viewpoint diversity in selecting program participants, so in selecting participants, we asked them to self-report their political orientation (with 1 = extreme left and 10 = extreme right). While 10 participants identified as extreme left (reporting 1 or 2 on the 10-point scale), only two participants identified as extreme right (reporting 9 or 10). Sixteen percent of participants did not respond to this question.

Program content and learning processes

To address the authentic needs of participants, our team worked collaboratively to build the learning outcomes for the program, emphasizing the positive power of communication, dialogue, and discussion to build relationships of compassion, trust, and respect. These learning outcomes were identified as most important:

Table 1. Overview of PD program topics, methods modeled, and discussion questions.

TOPICS	METHODS MODELED	DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Engage with Courageous Questions	Small group dialogue and discussion	Why do educators and students need to be courageous?
Consider the Misperceptions We Hold	Media analysis and critical self reflection	What misperceptions do you have about others and how may they affect your family, work, and life experiences?
Analyze and Evaluate Media Related to Violent Extremism	Close reading, debate, risk-benefit analysis and ideological analysis	What scaffolds help students learn to analyze media messages that address the topic of violence?
Reflect on Storytelling as Both Personal and Political	Digital storytelling	Why is storytelling can be both a personal and a political act? How may it help people transcend political differences?
Behold the Power of Creative Expression	Student media production	How have those promoting political violence used creativity to communicate their message?
Participant Showcase	Viewing and discussion and media production	How do teachers adapt the instructional practices of media literacy to meet the needs of their learners?

- Engage with others with kindness, acknowledging the humanity and autonomy of all individuals and being mindful of their background, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors.
- Understand the messages being communicated by others (both interpersonally and via mass communication), the goal of finding common ground, and the challenges facing their communities through practicing active listening.
- Analyze and evaluate the opinions and information being communicated by others by developing both critical and media literacies.
- Participate in civic life, using the analytical, social, and emotional skills they have developed to help build and better their communities.
- Express perspectives and share experiences in effective ways (using media or other means) in an effort to promote nonviolence.
- Showcase the educational potential of create-to-learn projects that build knowledge, creativity, confidence, and leadership skills.

In describing each of the program sessions below, we use evidence from program transcripts as well as qualitative data from participants' written responses to an open-ended question, which asked, 'What was a key takeaway for you in this session?' Table 1 provides a summary of the PD program topics, methods modeled, and small group discussion questions, followed by a brief description of participants' reflection on insights they gained in each session.

Engage with courageous questions

At the first gathering, we wanted to get to know the educators who were enrolled in the program, so we engaged participants to share about their background and life experiences that drove them to apply to participate in the program. The pedagogical practice we modeled was small group dialogue and discussion. We asked participants to introduce themselves to each other by responding to the question, 'Why do educators and students need to be courageous?' This approach also helped us better understand the backgrounds, motivations, and concerns that participants were bringing to the table, and we used this information to design subsequent sessions.

In session one, participants spontaneously raised several issues including concerns about extremist violence, media-government-public relationships, propaganda and indoctrination, meeting the needs of new immigrants, and political polarization. Educators have concerns about the growing reality of extremist violence in public life. One participant explained, *'Preventing violent extremism would seem the most important goal ultimately. If the general public is educated about the dangers of social media, then perhaps we could prevent the types of acts of violence we witness nationally.'* Educators saw the need to be courageous as a necessary response to meeting the needs of all students, including new immigrants, and several participants were concerned about student exposure to harmful propaganda. Some educators reflected on bias in how multilingual learners are perceived, recalling deficit language they hear from colleagues such as, *'They don't pay attention because they get everything for free.'* One participant emphasized, *'We need courageous conversations about how to support our MLL students without letting our own biases interfere.'* Educators also admitted their own fears about potentially being accused of indoctrination, noting that '*We are under constant scrutiny. We need to constantly walk the fine line between challenging our students to achieve a higher level of critical thinking and claims of indoctrination.*' They also recognized that extremism can take many forms. Noting also that she considers herself a moderate when it comes to political and social issues, she recognizes that universities are '*bastions of uber-liberal values where moderate isn't well-liked.'* She was drawn to the program by the fact that *'many of us seem to need to be on one side or the other, as far away from the other guy as we can get.'* Evidence from transcripts and a post-event questionnaire shows that educators acknowledge that polarization and extremism are affecting their students' lives and recognize the potential for education to engage with these challenges.

Consider the misperceptions we hold

In this session, the focus was on increasing awareness of the blind spots and biases that may motivate political violence, anti-democratic attitudes, and animosity across partisan lines. The pedagogical practices we modeled included media analysis and critical self reflection, using a video entitled 'America's Divided Mind: Video Intervention' by the Beyond Conflict Innovation Lab for Neuroscience and Social Conflict. The video features everyday Americans from across the country, and we see how they significantly overestimate the gap between Democrats and Republicans on major issues. The video was identified as highly effective in a competition carried out by the Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford University. After sharing their thoughts and feelings in response to the video, participants were then asked to critically analyze it using the five critical questions of media literacy. During the synchronous session, participants discussed these questions in small group breakout rooms:

- How does the research on misperceptions relate to your life and experience?
- Which of these ideas is most interesting/relevant/useful to you?
- How could you address these ideas with your students?

Nearly all participants drew personal connections between their experience with partisanship and their work as educators. Some noteworthy takeaway responses include the need to make active listening a more central component of civic education. One participant said, *'Getting to know what people think always seems to reveal many more nuances and much more common*

ground than we realize. This reminded me to take the time to really get to know people, to build relationships.' Another participant said, *'This video serves as a reminder for me . . . to emphasize the importance of focusing on the issues rather than fixating on someone's political party or candidate choices.'* Embracing differences was seen as the key to the quest for knowledge and fostering a more inclusive and informed society.

Evidence of metacognition and reflection were also evident in this session. For example, one participant said,

> This research reveals that we have more in common than we realize, yet we often choose (as a society) to focus on our differences. I have to face the reality that I, too, am part of the problem when I am upset about how the "other side" feels about an issue without taking the time to listen and really think about another perspective. It's humbling . . .

This evidence shows that participants could make a personal connection between media representations and the stereotypes that may contribute to rising levels of political polarization.

Analyze and evaluate media related to violent extremism

This session was led by all four faculty members, who modeled how they help students of different ages develop critical thinking skills about media. The session provided four mini-lessons intended to inspire educators as they begin the process of developing original lesson plans that are specifically targeted to the needs of their own learners and address issues related to targeted violence and extremism. Pedagogical practices included close reading, debate, risk-benefit analysis, and ideological analysis, which were selected to ensure their relevance to teachers of both younger and older students. Table 2 shows the content, activity, and focus questions of these mini-lessons.

Table 2. Media literacy mini-lessons model analysis and evaluation of complex texts.

TOPIC	ACTIVITY	FOCUS QUESTIONS
Were there Black Confederate Soldiers?	This close reading involved repeated viewing of a short video titled "A Tribute to Our Black Confederate Heroes" produced by Heritage Not Hate Productions.	First viewing: Focus on words and pictures. What symbols do you see? Which photos do you notice? What text jumps out at you? Second viewing: Focus on music and lyrics. What jumps out at you? What is happening in the story?
Were the Stonewall Riots a Form of Violent Extremism?	This activity involves close reading and contextualization as students compare four different primary source documents about the causes of the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969.	What is the tone of the author toward the patrons of the Stonewall Inn? Cite at least one example to support your answer. Is this a reliable source on the riots? Why or why not?
Contemporary Propaganda	This activity uses a risk-benefit analysis activity to examine media artifacts selected by students at the Mind Over Media Propaganda Gallery https://bit.ly/3SZ9H5Z	Is this example of propaganda beneficial or harmful? What are the reasons for your answer? How does this propaganda activate strong emotions, simplify ideas and information, appeal to audience needs, or attack opponents?
Violence Represented as Heroism in Superhero Movies	This activity demonstrates ideological analysis using a film clip from *Captain America: The First Avenger*. After introducing students to the term "ideology," they apply the concept by examining an artifact of popular culture to consider the politics of superhero stories.	What political viewpoint is confirmed by the "Star-Spangled Man with a Plan"? Whose interests are served by the message being communicated? What role does the sequence play in the context of the film's era – WWII-era America? What role might the sequence play in the context of today?

Reflect on storytelling as both personal and political

This session focused on using storytelling to bridge political divides and foster courageous engagement in educational settings. The pedagogical practice we modeled was viewing and discussion and the pedagogy depicted in the video was digital storytelling. Participants first viewed and discussed the video 'Why Facts Don't Convince People.' Then they analyzed a student-produced video 'Like a Lion' which features a boy who recovered from trauma through telling his story using a simple metaphor about the need to be a courageous communicator. This session built an important connection between courage, storytelling, identity, and social – emotional growth. Participants engaged in breakout sessions to reflect on how storytelling can be both a personal and a political act. Storytelling can also help people transcend political differences.

Many educators commented on the power of implementing storytelling in the classroom, telling stories about their experiences. One teacher said, *'There is power in storytelling to get to the heart of whatever you are trying to teach content or skill set'* and another pointed out, *'It is important to encourage students to share their perspectives. This is how we can help them embolden their voice and reshape perspectives.'* One educator said, *'I loved the ideas about using photography, recipes, songs to encourage/as springboards for storytelling.'* One teacher noted that opportunities to talk about their lives helps to create safe spaces where students can tell their stories and feel comfortable doing so to feel accepted, heard and safe in their school community. She said, *'Learning can't happen if they don't feel safe.'* Another reflected, *'I am thinking about how to create safe spaces for students to be vulnerable and share their stories and how very powerful student stories can be.'* Relationship-building can occur through storytelling, as one noted, *'I love hearing and talking about the importance of stories with students – creating them, sharing them, and listening to them – this is the meat and potatoes of relationships which is the path to peace.'*

Behold the power of creative expression

This session focused on the power of creativity in advocating for nonviolence and combating hate, and the pedagogical practices modeled included viewing and discussion and media production. Participants explored how creative expression can be misused for harmful purposes, such as political violence, using examples like the Capitol attack on 6 January 2021. Lively discussion occurred in response to the question, 'How have those promoting political violence (past & present) used creativity to communicate their message?'

Participants watched and discussed clips from films about media's role in promoting violent racism (*BlacKkKlansman*) and media's role in promoting peace (*The Interrupters*) to analyze how media can both perpetuate and counteract violence. The session also highlighted the role educators play as 'teacher-creators' and introduced the Courageous Rhode Island Youth Media Contest, encouraging educators to inspire their own students to use creative skills for positive change. The session included time for guidance on the Final Assignment and Gallery Walk Showcase, emphasizing the need for creativity and courage.

Many teachers were inspired to incorporate creativity into teaching. One teacher said, *'I need to plan creativity into more activities, lessons, and even assessments – it makes things fun, engaging, and memorable. Remembering my own time as a student reminded me of that.'* Another pointed out, *'I enjoyed the brief discussion in the breakout session on how*

lecturing (and teaching in general) can be a creative endeavor.' Most noted that their perceptions of creativity and creative expression were broadened through hearing the ideas of their peers. One teacher said, *'Sometimes I forget about the many art mediums and focus on the visual; I need to remember the full spectrum of creative expression.'* Another described a key takeaway from the session by noting that *'everyone has something to say and can express it in different ways – our job as teachers is to create the opportunity for them to do so.'* One educator said, *'I think I actually am more creative than I had previously thought of myself.'*

Gallery Walk Showcase

Professional development programs are generally justified on the grounds that education should help inculcate general skills that transfer to educational practice (Zepeda 2019). In this project, participants were responsible for completing a final assignment, which offered an opportunity for them to transfer learning from the PD context to their work and school contexts. Participants worked on these projects for one month and presented their completed work at the final showcase session in small-group breakout sessions. Participants were encouraged to address the intersection of media literacy and active listening to reduce the hate and fear that leads to violence. Of the 54 participants, 45 (83%) produced original work and earned certificates.

Participants created curriculum resources and activities for diverse school contexts, including middle school, high school, college, graduate school, and even current teaching staff. All participants received an email with personalized feedback from their designated mentor teacher. A sample of projects created by three teachers illustrates the various ways that teachers adapted program content to align with their teaching role, curriculum requirements, and perceived needs of students.

A high school English teacher created 'Poems as a Creative Platform.' In this lesson, students explore the poetry of Amanda Gorman to appreciate how the stories told in poetry are a form of communal cultural participation. Poetry provides concepts and purpose necessary for a community to survive harsh conditions, such as wars or other cultural upheavals. It can help reinforce values and community ideals. Students look at poetry from across time and place and investigate how it is used to affect social change.

A teacher of new immigrants created a PD program for classroom teachers in her district entitled, 'Media Literacy 101 for MLLs.' In this lesson, teachers learn why media literacy is important by learning to understand and identify point of view, bias, and stereotyping. Then they practice their skills by activating the 'reality check' function of critical thinking that can be used to counteract the fear and hate that can be present in media representations in news and entertainment.

Two college teachers collaborated to create 'Social Media, Patriotism, and Violent Extremism in Cultural Context.' Using a cultural studies methodology, students explore the visual language used to persuade social media audiences to follow a leader or participate in a rally that was used to incite violence on 6 January 2021 (in the USA) and 8 January 2023 (in Brazil). Activities included dialogue and discussion to practice visual reading of persuasive texts; analysis of how patriotism is visually constructed; reflection on how personal exposure to themes/motifs of patriotism is shaped by their own media choices; and discussion on how cultural context shapes interpretation of media.

The range of work shows participants drew directly from the PD experience, applying instructional practices to meet the needs of their students. Many demonstrated near-transfer, adapting activities modeled during the program. Other projects, such as one that compares political extremism across cultures, show evidence of far-transfer (Barnett and Ceci 2002).

Findings

We present longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data from Waves 1, 2, and 3 to examine how participation in a U.S.-based media literacy PD program affects educators' confidence, instructional strategies, and willingness to use media literacy instructional practices into the classroom. We present a summary of qualitative data first, focusing on the data collected from transcripts of sessions and pre- and post-surveys conducted throughout the duration of the program. We then present Wave 1 data, looking at first at changes that occurred immediately from the start to the conclusion of each of six sessions. Next, we report findings from Wave 2, pre-post survey research that measures changes that occurred over the entirety of the program (between September and December). Finally, we present findings from Wave 3, a delayed posttest conducted a full nine months after the program was completed.

Participants' critical awareness and pedagogical preparation

Across the early sessions of the PD program, participants consistently articulated specific, interrelated concerns that situate their instructional work within a broader sociopolitical context. For example in Session 1, we engaged educators in dialogue, inviting them to share their perspectives on the program's themes including media literacy, violent extremism and disinformation. In response, participants raised issues like propaganda, polarization, and the challenges of supporting multilingual and immigrant students, revealing their awareness of the ways these dynamics shape students' lived experiences. These discussions were marked by both urgency and ambivalence: participants expressed a desire to respond courageously to these conditions while also acknowledging the challenges of doing so. For example, they expressed anxieties about being perceived as indoctrinating their students and noted the difficulties they might face in interrogating commonly held biases.

Throughout the program, as trust was developed through small-group discussion, collaborative analysis, and storytelling, the conversations among participants became more explicitly connected to their own lived experiences, as educators drew parallels between their encounters with political partisanship and their time in the classroom. This shift allowed for participants to articulate how pedagogical approaches grounded in active listening, media analysis, and deliberately engaging with diverse political perspectives might benefit them in their efforts as educators. For example, participants particularly responded to Session 4's emphasis on digital storytelling – and specifically to our team's sharing of their own stories – as several educators noted how personal narratives can be a powerful means of fostering trust and creating contexts in which students feel safe, heard, and valued.

As participants concluded the PD program, they demonstrated an expanded understanding of creativity and its role in student expression, emphasizing the importance of designing opportunities for all students both to communicate their perspectives in varied ways and to be open to the perspectives expressed by others. For example, by Session 6, qualitative evidence from participant-created work suggests meaningful instructional transfer, with many educators adapting or directly implementing strategies modeled during the program. Instances of transfer were evident, including projects that applied program concepts to new contexts, such as comparative analyses of political extremism across cultures. Taken together, these findings indicate a progression from concern and reflection toward increased pedagogical confidence and the integration of program principles into practice.

Confidence in using media literacy to address violent extremism

As demonstrated in the summary of qualitative data collected throughout the program, we our analysis found that participants grew in confidence in their ability to use MLE analysis techniques to address issues related to targeted violence and terrorism prevention. At the beginning and end of each session, we asked participants to rate themselves on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all confident, 7 = very confident). Session 1 focused on this question, 'How confident are you in explaining why media literacy matters for work, life, and citizenship?' For all sessions, growth in confidence occurred, as Table 3 shows. Clearly, the experience of presenting their work to an audience of peers greatly boosted teacher confidence.

Perceptions of media literacy

Wave 2 findings are presented next. Participants completed a pretest in September and a posttest in December. Of the 38 participants who completed the pretest, 30 also completed the posttest. We performed statistical tests on only those cases where we had both pretest and posttest responses using paired samples methodology. We asked participants, 'Compared to all other educational priorities, how urgent is it to strengthen students' media literacy competencies?' Participants rated this on a 7-point scale (1 = not

Table 3. Educator confidence in addressing violent extremism through MLE instructional practices.

SESSION	QUESTION	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Confidence Gain
1	How confident are you in explaining why media literacy matters for work, life, and citizenship?	5.17	5.62	8.4%
2	How confident are you in modeling for your students ways to ease the hatred and fear that leads to political violence?	4.07	4.80	17.8%
3	How confident are you in using media literacy analysis activities to explore questions related to the topic of violent extremism?	4.89	5.54	13.3%
4	How confident are you in engaging your students in storytelling in your classroom as a form of courageous participation?	4.54	5.04	10.8%
5	How confident are you in using creative expression activities to help students explore courageous questions?	4.91	5.31	7.9%
6	How confident are you in implementing the final assignment action plan you developed?	6.03	6.56	8.7%

urgent, 7 = very urgent). At pretest, 14 (33%) participants rated urgency at the highest level. At posttest, 18 (42%) rated it at the highest level. The McNemar test shows statistically significant differences between pretest and posttest $X^2(1, N = 30) = 4.70$, $p = .001$.

Implementation of MLE instructional practices

The Wave 2 posttest survey asked three questions to measure implementation of MLE's core instructional practices in the classroom. We asked, 'In the future, how likely are you to bring the practices of media literacy education into your classroom, library, or work context?' Response options were presented on a 7-point scale with 1 = not likely and 7 = very likely. A mean score of 6.46 (SD = 1.18) indicates that most participants were reported being very likely to bring media literacy instructional practices into the classroom, library, or other workplace context.

We also asked, 'How likely is it that you will implement your Final Assignment in the future?' Participants responded on the 3-point scale (very likely, likely, not likely). Thirty-seven out of 42 (88%) participants indicated they were very likely to implement the project they created.

We also asked, 'Since you began the program, have you incorporated ideas, information, or instructional strategies in your work with learners or colleagues?' Participants responded on a dichotomous scale (yes, no), and results show that 41 out of 42 (97%) participants indicated they had incorporated ideas, information, or instructional strategies in their own work.

Confidence in using MLE instructional practices

In Wave 2, we also measured growth in confidence using various MLE instructional practices that were demonstrated in the Courageous Rhode Island PD Program. At both pre- and posttest, we used nine items that identified some instructional practices we modelled in the program. We asked participants to rate their level of confidence in teaching students to analyze media (their ability to teach critical thinking about media and technology; analyze propaganda and disinformation, connect media literacy to my content area). We also measured their confidence in using dialogue and discussion (teach active listening skills; lead conversations about media, technology, and social issues; explore multiple, diverse, and competing interpretations or points of view). Finally, we measured educator confidence in creating media (use the power of storytelling to promote civic participation; prepare students to express themselves critically and creatively; and minimize challenge in what and how I teach).

Statistically significant improvements in confidence between pretest and posttest were found for all nine items, as Table 4 shows. Most teachers who participated in the program had little confidence when they first began the program and experienced dramatic increases in confidence over time.

Of the 30 educators who completed both pre and posttest, only 13 rated themselves as very confident in connecting media literacy education to their content area at pretest but this grew to 24 at posttest. Furthermore, at pretest, only 8 participants felt very confident teaching critical thinking about media and technology, but this rose to 23 participants at

Table 4. Number of educators reporting they feel 'very confident' about core learning outcomes at pretest and posttest.

ITEMS	PRETEST	POSTEST	X^2	P
Analyze Media				
Teach critical thinking about media and technology	8	23	3.5	0.001
Connect media literacy education to my content area	13	24	3.35	0.001
Analyze propaganda and disinformation	8	19	3.05	0.001
Dialogue and Discussion				
Teach active listening skills	8	18	4.23	0.001
Lead conversations about media, technology, and social issues	11	24	3.35	0.001
Explore multiple, diverse, and competing interpretations or points of view	10	20	3.9	0.001
Self Expression				
Use the power of storytelling to promote civic participation	6	16	4	0.001
Prepare students to express themselves critically and creatively	10	18	3.6	0.001
Minimize challenges in what and how I teach	3	8	4.47	0.001
McNemar Exact Test				
$N = 30$				

posttest. Participants also experienced substantial growth in the instructional practice that involves analyzing propaganda and disinformation. At pretest, only 8 participants felt very confident in this, but at posttest, 19 participants felt very confident.

Dialogue and discussion is another core instructional practice of media literacy education. While only 11 felt very confident at leading conversations about media, technology, and social issues at pretest, 24 reporting being very confident at posttest. At pretest, only 10 participants indicated they were very confident in exploring multiple, diverse, and competing interpretations or points of view, but this grew to 20 participants by posttest. In addition, at pretest, 8 participants felt confident in teaching active listening skills. By posttest, 18 participants indicated they were very confident in doing this.

Creating media is another core pedagogy of media literacy education, and participants in this PD program experienced substantial growth in preparing students to express themselves critically and creatively. At pretest, only 10 participants felt very confident in this, but at posttest, 18 participants felt very confident. Similarly, participants increased their confidence in using the power of storytelling to promote civic participation. The number of participants who rated themselves as very confident grew from 6 to 16 participants from pre-test to posttest. Finally, we asked participants to rate their confidence in minimizing challenges in what and how they teach. This is an issue directly related to how educators tell their own story about the curricular choices they make. The number of participants who rated themselves as very confident in minimizing challenges grew from 3 participants pre-test to 8 participants at posttest. Although it represents a statistically significant finding, there is room for continued growth as fewer than one in three educators feels very confident in minimizing challenges, even after completing the program.

Long-term impact

A delayed posttest in Wave 3 shows substantial evidence of continuing engagement with media literacy instructional practices and content a full nine months after the PD program ended. Thirty-one of 42 participants completed the retrospective survey. They answered the question, 'Last year, did you incorporate ideas, information or instructional strategies from the program in your work with learners?' Ninety-three percent of participants

Table 5. Instructional practices and content topics used nine months after program completion.

Instructional Practices	Percent
Critical analysis of media messages	68
Dialogue and discussion	80
Digital storytelling	36
Other media production activities	32
Content and Topics	**Percent**
Propaganda and Disinformation	71
Political Polarization	38
Extremism and Radicalization	17
Ethics, Care, Creativity, and Joy	33
Being a Responsible Consumer & Creator of Media Messages	67
Benefits Risks, and Harms of Social Media	71

reported 'yes,' and 79% also reported that they had used resources from the program website after it was completed. In addition, 65% of participants indicated that they had implemented the final assignment they created.

We also wanted to learn whether the instructional practices we modelled were being used by teachers. Participants responded to the question, 'Which of these instructional strategies did you use with your learners?' As Table 5 shows, 68% indicated that they used critical analysis of media, 80% used dialogue and discussion, 36% used digital storytelling, and 32% used other media production activities. When asked about the topics they explored with students, 71% indicated they taught about propaganda and disinformation, 38% taught about political polarization, 17% taught about extremism and radicalization, 33% taught about ethics, care, creativity, and joy, 67% taught about being a responsible consumer and creator of digital media, and 71% taught about the benefits, risks, and harms of social media.

All three important instructional practices of the program were in use nine months after participants completed the PD program. Eight in ten teachers were using dialogue and discussion pedagogies, and nearly seven in ten were using media analysis activities. When digital storytelling is combined with other media production activities, nearly seven in 10 teachers use creative expression activities. This is strong evidence that the PD experience creates lasting change in classroom instructional practices.

However, only one in five teachers who were introduced to media literacy and the prevention of violent extremism were teaching about it nine months after the program's conclusion because the topic of violent extremism is inherently risky and challenging to address, particularly in middle school and high school. It is possible that teachers prefer not to frame curriculum around 'problems' like preventing violent extremism, political polarization, and radicalization. Teachers may prefer to emphasize being a responsible consumer and creator of media messages (67%) and exploring the benefits, risks, and harms of social media (71%) perhaps because these competencies have the greatest generalizability to media use in everyday life.

Discussion

The alignment of peace education and media literacy education can be significantly enhanced by shifting the focus toward core competencies that directly address

violence, polarization, and social justice, and by adopting pedagogical approaches that emphasize dialogic engagement. UNESCO's definition of MLE aligns with peace education's goal of fostering critical competencies, encompassing critical, ethical, and participatory engagement with media, information, and digital technology. Political polarization and animosity are deepened in cultural contexts that normalize structural violence, and when amplified by technology and social media that mass distribute half-truths, propaganda, and political manipulation. How people talk to each other (or stop talking to each other) is at the heart of polarizing conflicts among social groups, and these conflicts 'unfold in the public sphere' where, for democratic societies to thrive, there needs to be moderate conflict: 'neither too little nor too much' (Schedler 2023, 344).

But dialogic teaching methods – a core tenet of peace education – are not easy to learn. To help students engage meaningfully with media content across differences, dialogic pedagogy involves the questioning, interrogation, and negotiation of ideas and opinions in a mutually respectful manner. Such approaches can help students build perspective-taking skills and navigate a world of complex and intersecting social, political, cultural, and economic relationships.

This study demonstrates that educator confidence is a key factor in the adoption and sustained use of media literacy instructional practices like critical analysis of media texts, dialogue and discussion, and student media creation. Across three data waves, statistically significant gains in confidence were observed in media analysis, dialogue and discussion, and creative expression. These results support previous research identifying self-efficacy as a predictor of pedagogical innovation and persistence (Reynolds 2025). When educators feel more confident, they are more likely to experiment with new teaching strategies, adapt curriculum materials, and engage students in higher-order thinking – particularly when the subject matter is politically sensitive or personally challenging.

Notably, increased confidence also facilitated meaningful transfer from professional learning to classroom practice. Participants reported integrating MLE strategies into their instruction long after the program's conclusion. The design elements that contributed to this transfer include modeling of instructional strategies, structured opportunities for educator dialogue, scaffolded lesson planning, and personalized mentor feedback. These elements collectively supported both cognitive and emotional readiness to teach politically sensitive topics.

Despite the program's focus on violent extremism, only a small number of participants explicitly addressed the topic in their classrooms post-program. This finding underscores the perceived risk and sensitivity surrounding discussions of violent extremism in K–12 settings. Teachers appeared more comfortable addressing adjacent, less controversial topics such as media ethics, disinformation, and civic responsibility. This avoidance may reflect concerns about professional backlash or uncertainty about curricular alignment. These results suggest that while violent extremism is a relevant and important context for professional development, its long-term instructional impact may depend on how well educators feel supported in navigating complex political issues. Future PD programs should consider sustained implementation supports – such as coaching, peer learning networks, and administrator engagement – to further reinforce educator agency. Additionally, researchers should explore student-level outcomes, triangulate teacher self-reports with classroom data, and examine how identity factors influence teacher

engagement with controversial content. This exploratory research study provides strong evidence that shows that months after completing a PD program of only 10 hours in duration, teachers incorporate media literacy instructional practices like dialogue and discussion and critical analysis of media. These are more easily integrated into the curriculum than digital storytelling and other media production activities.

There are some important limitations of this research. Because we relied primarily on self-reported data, which is susceptible to social desirability bias, it is possible that participants may have overestimated their confidence or the extent to which they applied new practices in the classroom. The sample was also skewed demographically, with the majority identifying as White and politically liberal. Although the study sought ideological diversity, fewer than five percent of participants identified as politically conservative. Additionally, while 48 participants completed the program, some participants did not complete all three waves of data collection, which limits the generalizability and strength of the longitudinal analysis. Future research might benefit from utilizing additional measures of learning, besides self-reporting, in order to enhance the quality of the data. Deliberate inclusion of participants with greater geographic and political diversity would allow studies to avoid the demographic imbalance we experienced in our program. And future studies might choose to increase the number of participants, allowing the data that is collected to be stronger and potentially generalizable.

In sum, this study highlights how strategically designed PD can empower educators to integrate media literacy into civic education in ways that align with both professional realities and instructional goals. Growth in teacher confidence also facilitated the transfer of learning from the PD setting into classroom practice. The program's use of modeling, experiential learning, and participant-driven project design supported metacognitive development and reinforced the sense that teachers had both the competence and the agency to implement MLE strategies effectively. This highlights the importance of designing PD programs that not only deliver content but also intentionally build pedagogical confidence in peace education.

Participants expressed high engagement with the topic of violent extremism during the PD program, and nearly one in five reported explicitly teaching about violent extremism nine months after program completion. Violent extremism is a complex and often controversial topic, as it intersects with politically charged issues such as race, immigration, gun control, religion, and political identity. Some teachers may feel uncertain about how to approach the topic without alienating students, parents, or administrators. Others may fear being accused of indoctrination or of exceeding the bounds of their curriculum. But some gained sufficient confidence to continue to explore the topic with their students long after the PD program was completed.

Still, while violent extremism was a catalyst for the PD program, most teachers were more comfortable framing their instruction around adjacent themes – such as disinformation, media manipulation, civic engagement, and digital ethics – which they perceived as safer and more broadly applicable. This supports existing scholarship on peace education in the context of teaching controversial issues, which finds that teachers often avoid 'hot-button' topics due to concerns about professional repercussions or lack of institutional support (Duckworth 2024). This also aligns with recent empirical research on helping people deal with foreign disinformation, which found that learning to evaluate sources and heightening awareness of the strategic spread of unreliable information can improve

media literacy abilities without generating cynicism, nihilism, or reduced trust in quality journalism (Wagnsson, Östervall, and Angwald 2025).

The design of the PD program played a significant role in enabling educators to transfer learning into practice. Several design elements emerged as particularly impactful. They include: (1) modeling of instructional strategies through synchronous mini-lessons gave teachers practical tools and ideas they could adapt to their classrooms; (2) frequent and regular opportunities for dialogue among educators helped normalize the emotional and ethical tensions of teaching polarizing content; (3) scaffolded lesson planning and personalized mentor feedback supported the implementation of final projects; and (4) emphasis on teacher creativity and voice allowed participants to tailor learning to their unique student populations. Future PD programs aiming to advance peace education through addressing political polarization, violent extremism, or civic resilience should build on these principles. Designing for sustained implementation – perhaps through follow-up coaching, professional learning communities, or peer mentoring – may also increase long-term impact.

Lessons learned

The Courageous Rhode Island program demonstrated that a relatively brief, well-designed professional development experience can produce durable change in educators' confidence and classroom practice. The most important lesson is that modeling matters: by demonstrating dialogic instructional practices including small-group discussion, active listening, media analysis, and storytelling, the program gave teachers concrete tools they could adapt and carry into their own contexts. Statistically significant confidence gains across all nine instructional items, sustained nine months after completion, suggest that confidence functions as a critical bridge between professional learning and instructional transfer.

Equally instructive was the power of peer collaboration and teacher agency. Requiring participants to design and present original lesson plans during the Gallery Walk Showcase not only boosted confidence through authentic application but also produced evidence of both near- and far-transfer, as educators tailored program principles to populations ranging from multilingual learners to college students. The program reinforced that when teachers are trusted as creators and given structured opportunities to share work with peers, they are more likely to integrate new pedagogies into everyday practice.

Several aspects of the program reveal opportunities for refinement. Most notably, despite violent extremism serving as the catalyst for the program, only about one in five participants reported teaching about it nine months later, with most gravitating toward adjacent, 'safer' themes such as disinformation, media ethics, and civic responsibility. This pattern suggests the program could do more to scaffold educators' comfort with politically sensitive content directly – for example, by providing sustained implementation supports such as follow-up coaching, professional learning communities, peer mentoring, and explicit guidance on navigating concerns about indoctrination, parental pushback, or administrative resistance. The persistently low confidence in 'minimizing challenges in what and how I teach' points to a specific need for support around institutional and professional risk, an issue that has only increased during the second Trump administration, where a heightened sense of fear has arisen because of punitive

federal actions that affect both institutions and individuals. The program might also strengthen its reach by engaging school administrators directly, since teacher willingness to address controversial topics appears closely tied to perceived institutional backing.

Finally, the program's evaluation and recruitment design point to improvements for future iterations. Reliance on self-reported data leaves findings vulnerable to social desirability bias, and confidence or implementation may have been overestimated; incorporating classroom observations, student work samples, or interviews would allow triangulation and yield more robust evidence of actual practice change. The participant pool was also demographically and ideologically skewed toward predominantly White and politically liberal, with fewer than five percent identifying as conservative. This limits generalizability, which is especially important for a program premised on bridging political difference. Deliberate recruitment for greater geographic, racial, and political diversity, alongside a larger sample and stronger retention across all three data-collection waves, would substantially enhance the validity and reach of future studies. Building in measures of student-level outcomes would further help establish whether gains in teacher confidence ultimately translate into meaningful learning for students.

Conclusion

This study offers a foundation for future inquiry into the intersection of media literacy education, civic education, violence prevention, and peace education. Future research should examine student-level outcomes from media literacy instruction related to violent extremism and polarization. Classroom observations or student work samples could be used to triangulate self-reported teacher data. Interviews with educators could help explore how people from different racial, political, or cultural identities perceive and approach politically risky topics. It will be important to investigate the role of ongoing institutional support – such as administrative encouragement, curriculum alignment, and teacher collaboration – in sustaining long-term implementation of MLE practices. Finally, this work should inspire more theory and research on considering how PD programs can cultivate teachers' moral and civic courage to advance the cause of peace in polarized educational environments.

Data Repository

Survey instruments and data files are publicly available at the Open Science Repository (OSF) at https://osf.io/v6f2e/

Notes on contributors

Renee Hobbs is a Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School of Communication and Media. As a leading international expert on digital and media literacy education, she is the author of Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age (2020, W. W. Norton) and has raised $7+ million in funding for global media literacy initiatives at the Media Education Lab.

Kent Lenci is an experienced middle school educator and the founder of Middle Ground School Solutions, which helps explores the causes and consequences of political polarization, through his speaking and writing, he aims to equip today's students to ease tomorrow's political divisions. He is the author of *Learning To Depolarize: Helping Students and Teachers Reach Across Lines of Disagreement*.

John M. Palella II is Assistant Teaching Professor of Education and Faculty Supervisor of the Social Studies MAT program at Brown University. His research and teaching focus on culturally relevant social studies education, histories of American culture and society, and critical media and communication studies.

Benjamin Thevenin is a Professor of Media, Technology and Learning Design at Appalachian State University where he teaches courses on media literacy, new & digital media, storytelling and gaming. His book *Making Media Matter: Critical Literacy, Popular Culture, and Creative Production*. (Routledge, 2022) is a free resource for educators looking to integrate creative expression, critical reflection and civic participation in their media curriculum.

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