Educating for Pluralism in a Complex World
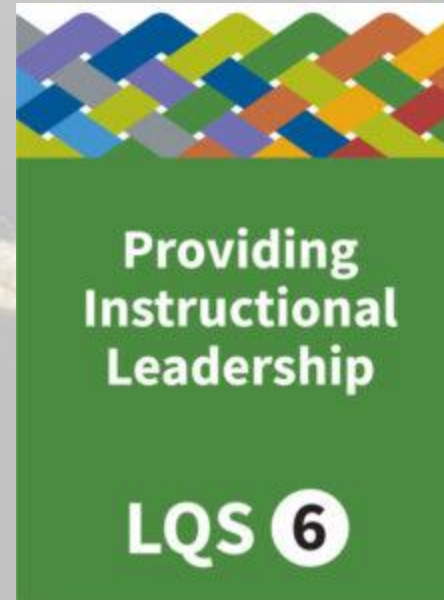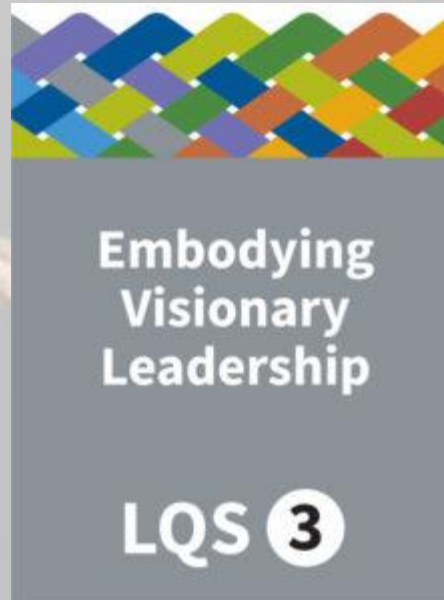
CASS Learning Conference

March 21, 2025
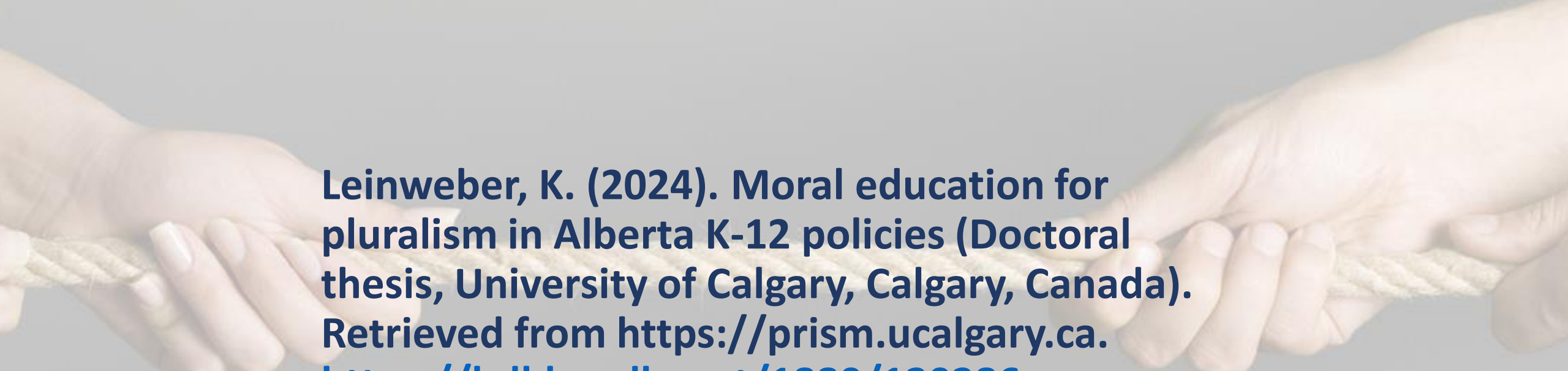
Dr. Kurtis Leinweber

Session Focus

- Examine limitations of current policies and traditional approaches to moral and character education in supporting value pluralism
- Propose principles and practices that better prepare students to navigate increasingly complex communities.
- Consider pluralism as a necessary element of fostering inclusive and tolerant learning environments.

Connected Competencies
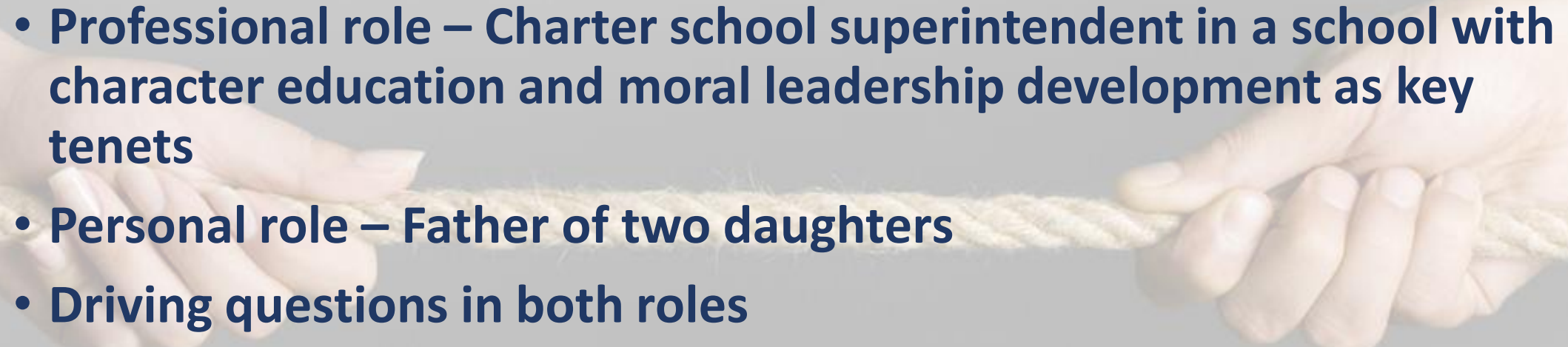
Visionary Leadership

SLQS ③

Embodying Visionary Leadership

LQS ③

Providing Instructional Leadership

LQS ⑥

Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

LQS ⑨

Basis for Presentation

Leinweber, K. (2024). Moral education for pluralism in Alberta K-12 policies (Doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from https://prism.ucalgary.ca. https://hdl.handle.net/1880/120286

Genesis of the Problem

- **Professional role – Charter school superintendent in a school with character education and moral leadership development as key tenets**

- **Personal role – Father of two daughters**

- **Driving questions in both roles**
  - **"How to teach good/bad/right/wrong (morality)?" led to more fundamental question…**
  - **"What is moral?" led to a more specific problem…**
  - **"How do we deal with conflicting moralities?"**

The lifeboat problem
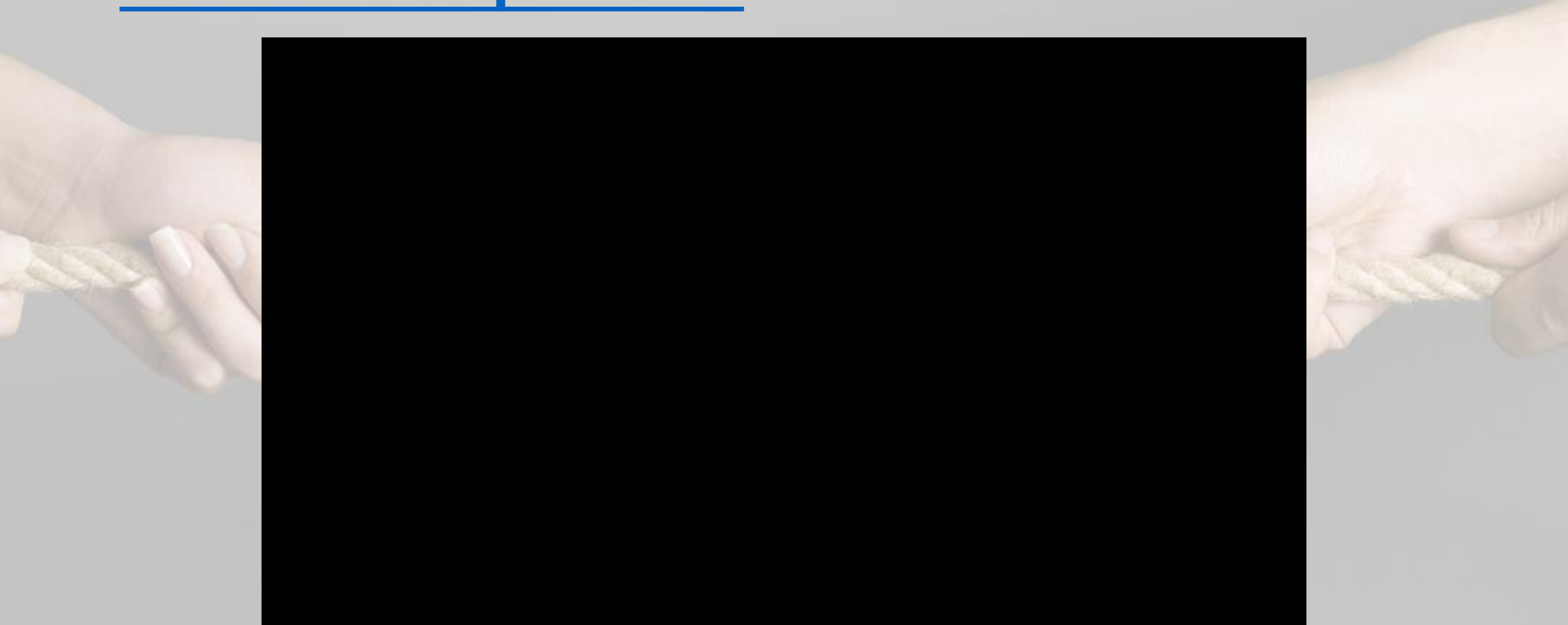
Table Discussion #1

- **Introduce yourselves including school authority and role.**
- **As a table group, discuss whether the actions of Dudley and the surviving crew were moral or immoral and why.**
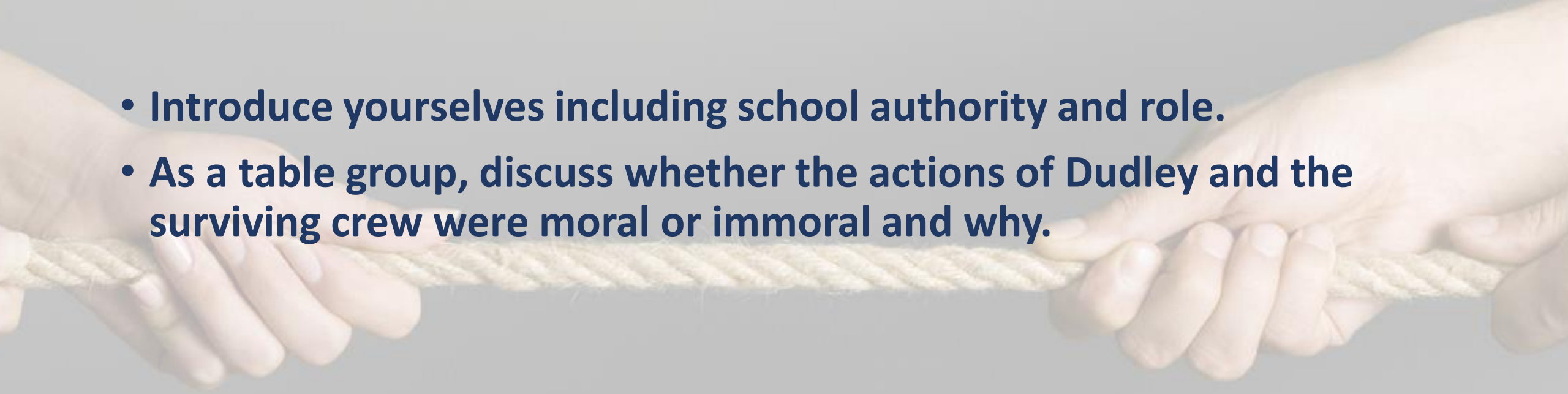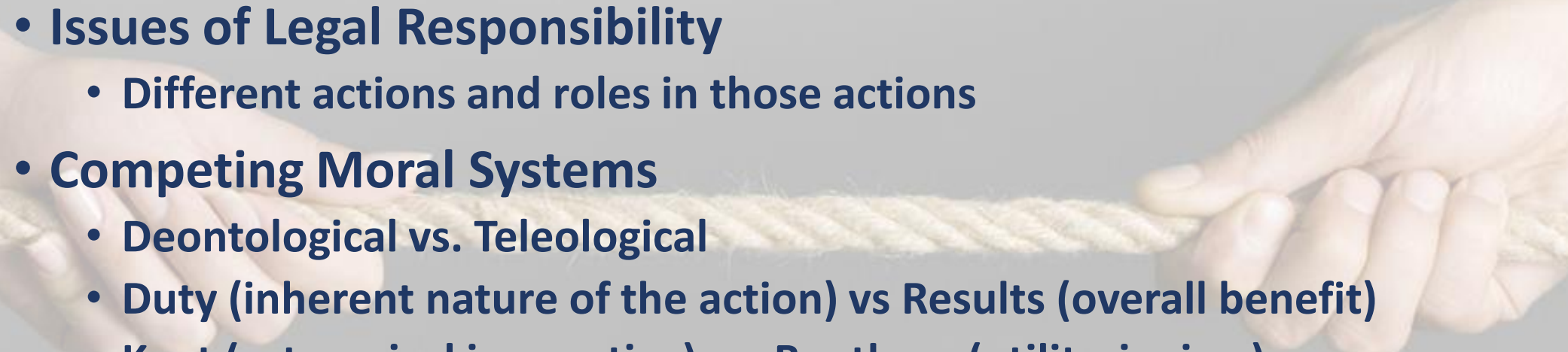
Table Discussion Debrief

- **Issues of Legal Responsibility**
  - **Different actions and roles in those actions**
- **Competing Moral Systems**
  - **Deontological vs. Teleological**
  - **Duty (inherent nature of the action) vs Results (overall benefit)**
  - **Kant (categorical imperative) vs. Bentham (utilitarianism)**

- **Each attempts to create 'the' rule book for determining right and wrong**

Key Discovery

- Isaiah Berlin's essay entitled, *The Pursuit of the Ideal* in which he argued:

- Argued the fallacy of utopian thought; impracticability and fundamental incoherence of a platonic ideal or 'final solution' (monism)

- Value pluralism is an unavoidable characteristic of any society
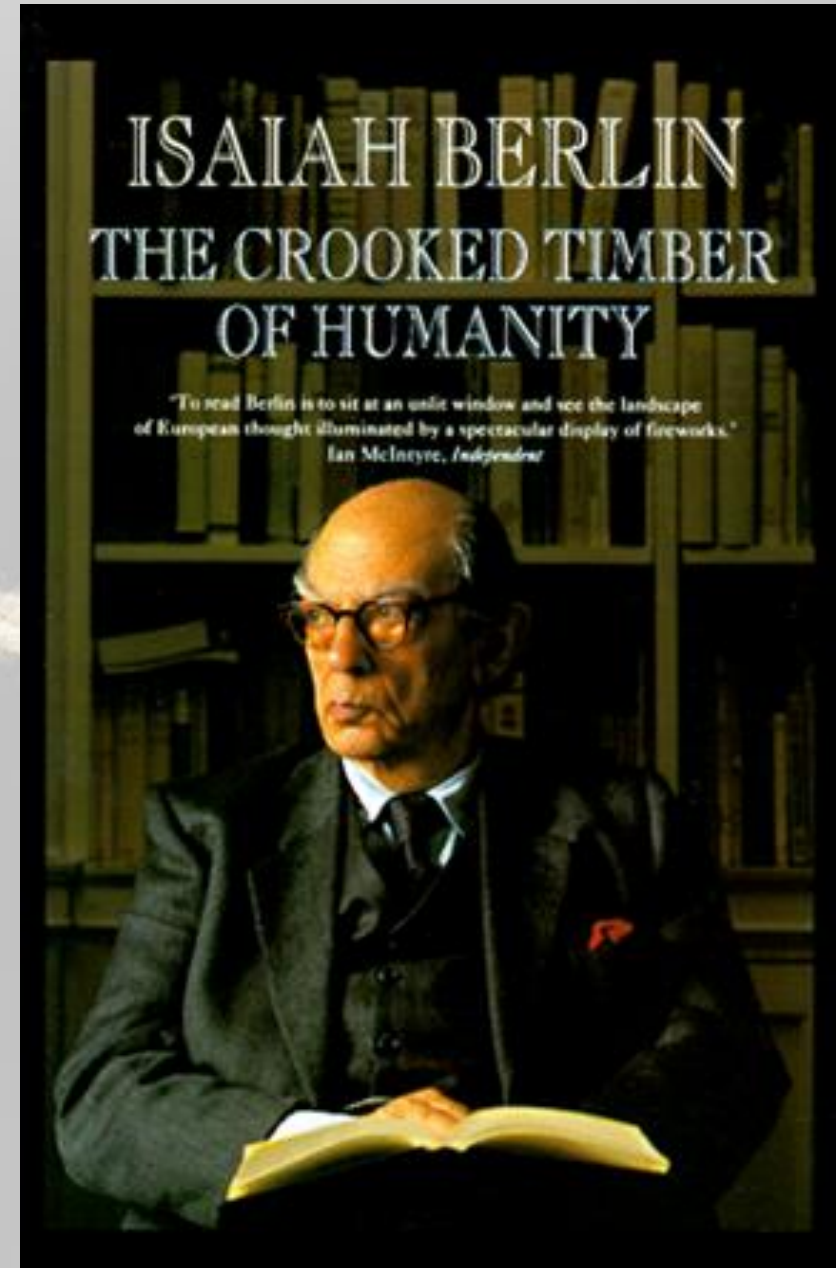
5 key elements of Berlin's value pluralism:

1. Value pluralism is to be distinguished from its opposite, monism, which attempts to reduce all goods to a common measure or create a comprehensive hierarchy or ordering for them.

2. Values, or objective goods, cannot be fully ranked. There is no common measure for all goods, which are qualitatively heterogeneous or *incommensurable*.

3. Some goods are required for any "choice worthy" conception of human life.

4. Beyond this list of basic goods, there is a wide range of legitimate conceptions of good lives.

5. Value pluralism ought not to be confused with relativism. The distinction between good and bad or right and wrong is objective and rationally defensible.

Monism & Relativism in Moral Education Approaches

- **Monistic Approaches**
  - Religious approach is grounded in a singular worldview with a spiritual or supernatural source of virtue.
  - Character education (virtue ethics) is premised upon the existence of universal virtues that serve the good society, although the nature of the universal virtues may differ.
  - The cognitive–developmental (justice-reasoning) approach holds at its core, an overarching universal principle of reasoned justice.
  - The care–ethic approach takes a monist view in establishing caring relationships as the universal good that requires precedence over all others including right and wrong.
- **Relativistic Approach**
  - Values clarification is grounded in both cultural and individual relativism viewing issues of right and wrong as being defined individually with universal definitions of the good being impossible.

Table Discussion #2

- **With a partner at your table, have each person share which, if any, specific approach or approaches to support student moral or ethical development are used in your school authority. If not a specific approach, how does moral/ethical education occur directly or indirectly in your schools? (5 min.)**

FFCA's Framework for 'Character Education'

Conceptual Framework for Pluralist Moral Education

Category of Underlying Assumptions	Meta-ethical Assumptions	Normative Moral Assumptions	Educational Assumptions
Defining Question(s) of Category	What is the nature and structure of moral values in a pluralist society?	What is or ought to be considered good, right, or virtuous in a pluralist society?	What is or ought to be taught relative to moral education in a pluralist society?
Elements of Berlin's Value Pluralism within Categories	Pluralism is the fundamental nature of the moral world, as opposed to monism or relativism Incommensurability of values leads to agonistic conflicts - Inherent - conflicts between values themselves - Internal - conflicts within an individual - Interpersonal - conflicts between individuals - Intergroup/Intercultural - conflicts between groups Universal values may exist but they are not absolute	Plurality of legitimate (but potentially incommensurable) values exist Universal values (which may still conflict) exist which are in the interest of all human beings such as: freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love Toleration is an essential value (that still conflicts with others) in a pluralist society	Importance of striving for a minimum threshold of negative liberty to pursue universal values Importance of Toleration How to negotiate conflicts within and between individuals and groups

Meta-ethical Assumptions *(What is the nature and structure of moral values in a pluralist society?)*

- **Pluralism is the fundamental nature of the moral world, as opposed to monism or relativism**

- **Universal values may exist but they are not absolute and still conflict**

- **Incommensurability of values leads to agonistic conflicts**
    - **Inherent - conflicts between values themselves**
    - **Internal - conflicts within an individual**
    - **Interpersonal - conflicts between individuals**
    - **Intergroup/Intercultural - conflicts between groups**

Table Discussion #3

- As a table group, discuss (10 min.) what value conflicts have presented themselves within your schools and how you / your team addressed or is working to address these conflicts. (HINT – encroachment of external political issues / conflicts into schools may often qualify)

- Choose one person from your group to share 1 of your groups identified conflict and approach to it.

Normative Moral Assumptions *(What is or ought to be considered good, right, or virtuous in a pluralist society?)*

- **Plurality of legitimate (but potentially incommensurable) values exist**

- **Universal values (which may still conflict) exist which are in the interest of all human beings such as: freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love**

- **Toleration is an essential value (that still conflicts with others) in a pluralist society**

Educational Assumptions *(What is or ought to be taught relative to moral education in a pluralist society?)*

- Importance of striving for a minimum threshold of negative liberty to pursue universal values

- Importance of Toleration

- How to negotiate conflicts within and between individuals and groups

Some Key Findings in Alberta Policies
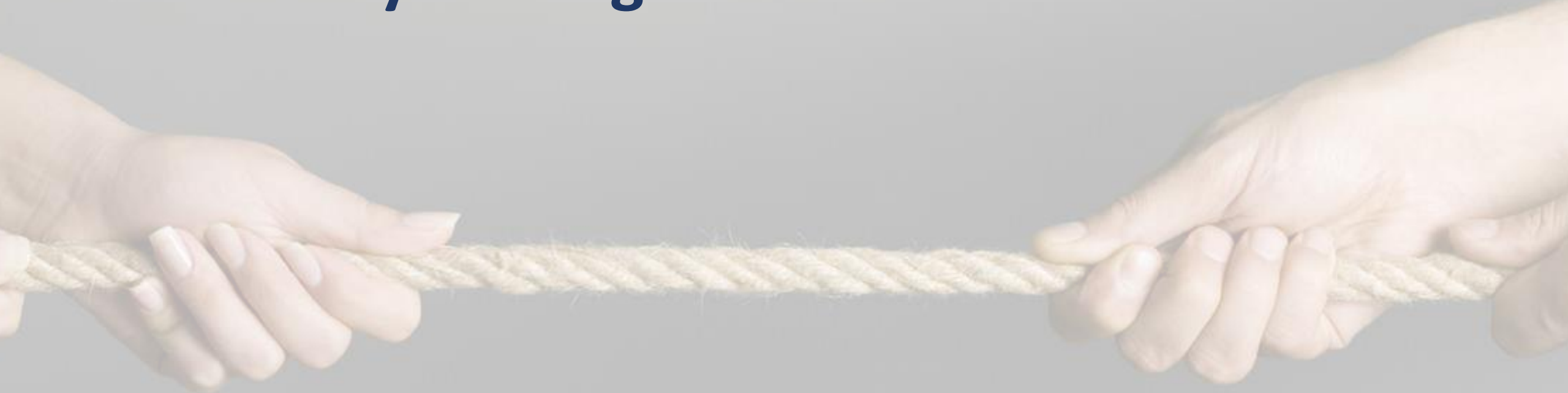
Pluralism in Alberta Policies

- **Alberta policies frequently presented pluralism in terms of multiple perspectives and diverse group identities, but the existence of inherent value pluralism was not specifically addressed in the policies.**

Value Incommensurability and Incompatibility in Alberta Policies

- Alberta moral education policies generally failed to expose students to agonizing choices which arise from value incommensurability and incompatibility.

- When value conflict was addressed, it was often implicit that resolution was possible or, when issues without resolution were identified, they were abstract and impersonal.

- As a result, moral education policies failed to substantively address means for negotiating such agonistic choices and value conflicts.

Implications of Inconsistency and Conflict Avoidance in Alberta policies

- Pluralism, in its essence, encourages exposure to diverse viewpoints and the negotiation of conflicting values. However, in instances where Alberta's policies recognized value conflicts, they leaned toward a resolution through avoidance rather than engagement (e.g. opt-out policy)

- Creates a scenario where pluralism is not genuinely practiced, as students are not exposed to the full range of values present in society, particularly those that may conflict with their family's beliefs.

Implications of Inconsistency and Conflict Avoidance in Alberta policies

- **By failing to engage students with, or actively shielding students from, certain value conflicts, the policies deprive them of the opportunity to engage with and understand diverse perspectives, which is an essential component of moral education in a pluralistic society.**

Key Features for Robust Pluralist Moral Education

- **Pluralism as a Core Principle**

- **Toleration as an Key Educational Aim**

- **Engagement with Agonistic Conflicts**

- **Fostering of Moral Independence**

- **Critical Dialogue and Negotiation**

- **Striving for Negative Liberty and Universal Values**

Table Discussion #4

- As a table group, discuss (10 min.) what, if any, opportunities you may see for incorporating elements of robust pluralist moral education in your school/authority?
    1. Pluralism as a Core Principle
    2. Toleration as an Key Educational Aim
    3. Engagement with Agonistic Conflicts
    4. Fostering of Moral Independence
    5. Critical Dialogue and Negotiation
    6. Striving for Negative Liberty and Universal Values

Praxis Recommendations

- Craft an explicit moral education policy that clearly defines key concepts as they are utilized in policy or practice.
- Expose students to both the conceptual idea of value incommensurability and incompatibility as well as actual agonizing conflicts and perspectives that may contradict their own personal values.
- Emphasize toleration and civility as critical virtues in a pluralist society.