Vrije Universiteit Brussel

HOW CAN EDUCATORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BELGIUM AND BEYOND?
Van Der Vet, Irina; Bisoffi, Daisy

Published in:
IES Policy Brief

Publication date:
2020

Document Version:
Final published version

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Van Der Vet, I., & Bisoffi, D. (2020). HOW CAN EDUCATORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BELGIUM AND BEYOND? *IES Policy Brief*, *2020/02*(May 2020).

How can educators contribute to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in Belgium and beyond?

by Irina van der Vet and Daisy Bisoffi

Introduction

Throughout the 2000s, Europe saw a comparatively high number of deadly terrorist attacks. These developments prompted the European Union (EU) Member States (MS) to look for national remedies and solutions (see e.g. Council of Europe, 2018). The design of new theoretical models, the involvement of new actors, and the expansion towards different domains, have all paved the way for the development, revision and upgrade of preventive policies – both at the national and supra-national levels. Education in particular, was attached a 'special status' in the fight against extreme ideologies. Belgium has been among the EU countries with a high number of home-grown terrorists and with the largest figures of foreign fighters per capita (Ravn, Coolsaet and Sauer 2019, 25). In an attempt to identify weaknesses and pitfalls found in the previous approaches that could explain this phenomenon, educators (classroom teachers, school principals, administrative and management staff) are constantly engaged in developing new arsenals of pedagogical methods and techniques.

In 2019, within the framework of the Horizon 2020 Mindb4ACT Project – devised to build a community of practice for innovative, ethical and effective actions against violent extremism – VUB developed a small-scale evidence-based pilot project. The evidence and information gathered through the pilot served as a starting point for the identification and analysis of gaps, providing a foundation on which

The role of educators in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation has been widely discussed in Europe since the late 2000s. The precursors for these debates have been the series of terrorist attacks throughout Europe and more recently, the rise of right-wing extremists movements. This Policy Brief examines the potential of educators in preventing and countering violent extremism. It draws upon an experiment on designing innovative solutions for teachers of secondary schools in Belgium, conducted within the framework of the European Union Horizon 2020 project, Mindb4ACT. Based on the findings of this pilot project, the brief outlines recommendations for educators and policymakers and offers trajectories for exploiting the potential of school staffs in combating violent radicalisation and extremism.

tools for addressing these gaps were created for Belgian schoolteachers. Building on the outcomes of the pilot, this policy brief aims to: 1) outline the main challenges that educators are faced with in the classroom; and 2) provide policy recommendations and action points that would support educators seeking to confront or help address issues present within their classrooms.

Lessons learnt from Belgian Educators

Up until today, education remains high on the agenda for sustainable success in tackling radicalization and violent extremism. Even though the impact of education is measurable only in the longer term, one cannot help but underpin its crucial role in individuals' socialisation and adaptation processes (Rappaport and Seidman 2012, Weidman 2006). This is further prevalent if the goal is to invest in a "holistic response to violent extremism and radicalisation, which looks at prevention from the earliest possible stages of education" (Council of Europe 2018, 6). That is to say, in a fully-fledged approach, capable of embracing the heterogeneity and complexity of radicalisation issues (Sjøen and Jore 2019, 269).

The pilot project, operated by VUB under H2020 Mindb4ACT, brought together Belgian experts in education, including schoolteachers and other professionals from fields at the intersection with education. They shared their experiences on preventing radicalisation, identifying pivotal needs, and formulating practical solutions. Data from these stakeholders was mainly collected through focus groups and a guided discussion. The gathered data allowed the identification of major gaps that educators experienced when facing radicalisation-related issues in their every-day professional routines.

The data analysis demonstrated that overall, these gaps reflected the scarce understanding of radicalisation as a phenomenon *tout court,* rudimentary familiarity with the variety of Belgian actors involved in addressing this issue and a lack of classroom-tailored practical tools and methodologies suitable for prevention. Specifically, stakeholders in the field of education expressed concerns about grasping the difference between radicalisation and extremism, and conceptual associations with terrorism.

This finding confirms the academic commentators' claiming that, despite having entered a variety of *milieus* (eg. academic, law enforcement and policy circles), the concept of 'radicalization' still remains vague to many. It is by no means as solid and clear as some argue (CONRAD 2019, Milo 2014). The absence of a legal definition for "radicalisation" in Belgian national legislation further complicates this issue. It allows a broad interpretation and diverse applications of security measures. As a result, 'radicalization' has surged to some sort of *default* explanation in relation to terrorist phenomena (CONRAD 2019, 7). Terrorism, on the other hand, is clearly defined in the Belgian Penal Code, art. 137. It includes — among other things — intentional homicide or deliberate assault, hostage taking, killing, mass destruction or degradation, and hijacking of aircrafts (Belgian Penal Code, art. 137). An appreciation of radicalisation as a peaceful process and a form of expression of "out of the box" thinking is rather uncommon, or better said, unpopular. Radicalisation seems to be first and foremost associated with a predisposition to violence (on the non-violent process towards the state of radicalisation, see McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Reinares et al. 2008; Vidino 2010; Schmid 2013). Consequently, the most common questions touched upon by teachers, *inter alia*, revolved around the border between violence and "peaceful" radicalisation, the detection of signs of radicalisation, and the nexus between behavioural deviations and predisposition to violence in students.

The discussion also revealed that educators are generally unaware of the existence of specific tools meant to support their daily work. Where this awareness existed, the rigid schedule did not leave teachers enough time to explore such tools. Some stakeholders also pointed out that the great amount of information available online tended to overwhelm teachers. They did not know where to find answers on how to react to particular situations in the classroom.

Another challenge voiced by the interviewed stakeholders related to the limited knowledge about the Belgian national approach towards counterradicalisation and the actors involved. Albeit seemingly unnecessary on initial consideration, such knowledge is in fact actively sought after by educators. They want to understand which bodies deal with schools and young people and in what way. Another problematic aspect is the difficulty teachers often face in adapting certain knowledge to the context of their teaching. Within the broader national educational system, regional specificities regarding teachers' workload and workflow add yet another layer of hardship (on the inter-regional discrepancies more broadly, see for example Hindriks and Verschelde, 2011; Vandenberghe, 2011; OECD 2015; Dupriez, et al. 2018). In addition, the accessibility to and systematic exchanges with Belgian authorities barely exist. A platform where teachers could discuss their concerns is absent. No regular forums or meetings between the two professional categories are in place. Fragmental and reactive in its nature, communication only occurs in case of significant/critical events happening at schools. The desire to go beyond ad hoc interactions and make them mandatory has been voiced by some stakeholders. They are better suited for early stage interventions.

In addition, teachers flagged a significant dearth of pedagogical tools both for in-classroom use and for self-training. Source, functionality, and applicability of these tools all pose a big question marks for teachers. The lack of awareness and specificity of certain tools may lead to a situation where improvisation or neglection seem to be the only options available to teachers. Two examples are quite telling in this respect. In the first case, when faced with a student who brought a Koran to school, a teacher decided to overlook the issue altogether. She lacked any guidance on how to best address it. Another reported case involved a foreign language teacher who tasked students with the production of a monologue discussing, 'Would I leave for Syria?' or 'Is it radical to be a vegan?' without providing any context. The context does matter, in this regard, for bringing the discussion in line with ethical pedagogical standards by introducing key categories, definitions and processes.

Evidently, the scarcity of appropriate resources and information, combined with the absence of preparedness and a support apparatus, constrains teachers to 'self-made,' ad hoc, and one-off solutions. Those are of questionable utility and potentially controversial. Responses and initiatives need to be rooted in a 'whole-school' approach, consistent across multiple areas of the curriculum and pedagogies, reliant on sustained coordination, and – to the extent possible – included in broader-vision programmes. These programmes should look to build fundamental skills and habits to maintaining/strengthening an adaptable and flexible resilience-building approach (RAN 2019, 1).

Policy recommendations:

Educators targeted:

- **A baseline study collecting detailed information on specific contextual needs, should be conducted among Belgian teachers. That could serve as a point of departure for policy-makers to provide clear and more targeted policies and measures.** Complex challenges faced by governments in the field of education call for sharing expertise and increasing collaboration. Therefore, think tanks and research groups should be given more support for filling in knowledge gaps, by bringing their own evidence and expertise closer to educators.
- **Teachers, together with school management, should use suggestions provided as inspiration for reorganising classroom activities and bringing innovative elements into the established system.**

These could include, but are not limited to, thematic curriculum projects, upgrading curricula, and adopting alternative learning models. If successful over time, adjustments could turn into best practices with broad applicability.

- **Teachers should engage with students to promote shared norms, values and objectives; generate understanding of group dynamics; strengthen social media literacy; and encourage critical thinking.** Through classroom activities, teachers should work towards: (i) increasing the sense of belonging in schools and promoting a 'shared future' unifying counter-radicalisation narrative; (ii) approaching prevention through humanistic, relational and inclusive pedagogics; and (iii) strengthening social media literacy, as well as critical thinking on the use of technology and its potentially double-edged consequences.

Policy-makers and National Authorities targeted:

- **Regular exchanges between teachers and policy-makers are crucial.** While acknowledging the key pillar of education in the development of a holistic counter-radicalization approach, the role of educators and teachers in preventing radicalisation is significantly understudied. Radicalisation demands equally flexible and up-to-date tools and solutions. Formal education needs to accelerate responses to current societal challenges to keep up with the rapid pace of developments.

- **Teachers' training is important in order to be more effective in their role in prevention.** Teachers need to be prepared to tackle a broad range of responsibilities/issues and be equipped to intervene, requiring niche skills that can only be obtained through exchanges with highly specialized professionals coming from local administration, social work services, psychology counseling, migration centers and many other specialized professionals. Exchanges should be encouraged and should become part of a continuous learning process. Adaptation and alignment of tools and competences with the latest trends and needs from the field – of which practitioners are holders *par excellence* – should be among the main priorities.

- **Discussions should be initiated at the policy level to identify options for adjusting or reforming the system.** Belgian educators are increasingly expected to play an important role in prevention – i.e. by detecting signs of radicalisation in students, organizing preventive activities and developing expertise to tackle the phenomenon pedagogically. Constraints imposed on educators and teachers by a rigidly regulated system curtails the development of longterm solutions. Coordinated approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation, and evaluation that embrace complexity are required.

- **Educators' role in national preventive approaches should be further detailed and granted greater visibility. It is crucial to place teachers in the chain of prevention security actors operating on the ground.** This will allow for a clear understanding of their mandate and adjust public expectations. While each sector has limitations and comparative advantages, better cooperation and partnerships should be sought as a point of departure for inclusive, long-term solutions.

- **Further research on identifying the role of education sector in prevention of CVE, consistent with national policy orientations, should be supported and encouraged by the state.** The contradicting vision of schools as 'spaces of detection' on the one hand, and spaces to address radicalisation/extremism (through bolstering social cohesion and building resilience) on the other, creates confusion and mixed feelings among teachers and educators. This conceptual contradiction can potentially have damaging implications. The blurring of expectations and responsibilities of schools runs the risk of 'securitizing' the education sector.

References

Belgian Penal Code. https://www.legislationline.org/documents/section/criminal-codes/country/41/Belgium/show

CONRAD. (2019). Final Report. Constructive analysis on the attitudes, policies and programmes that relate to "radicalisation". Belgian Science Policy Office. https://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/FinalReports/CONRAD_FinRep.pdf.

Council of Europe. (2018). Fight against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism" – Implementing the Action Plan. Final Report of the Secretary General. https://rm.coe.int/sg-inf-2018-7-fight-against-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-leadi/16807c0d4b.

Dupriez, V., Barbana, S. and Verhoeven, M. (2018). 'Structural and Systemic Dimensions of School Segregation in (French-Speaking) Belgium', in Bonal, X. and Bellei, C. (eds.), *Understanding School Segregation. Patterns, Causes and Consequences of Spatial Inequalities in Education*, (Bloomsbury), 45-64.

Hindriks, J. and Verschelde, M. (2011). 'Examining the Educational Gap Between Flemish and French-speaking Schools', in De Grauwe, P. and Van Parijs, P (eds.), *Educational Divergence: Why Do Pupils Do Better in Flanders Than in the French Community?*, (Re-Bel Initiative, e-Book 8), 36-40.

Mccauley, C. and Moskalenko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism. Terrorism and Political Violence. 20(3): 415-433.

Milo, D. (2014). 'Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism – a European Perspective', in Majer, M., and Ondrejcsák, R. (eds.), *Panorama of global security environment* (Bratislava: Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs). https://stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/panorama2013.pdf.

OECD. (2015). *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish Community of Belgium 2015*, (Paris: OECD Publishing). http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-en.

RAN. (2019). Ex Post Paper. Education and radicalisation prevention: Different ways governments can support schools and teachers in preventing/countering violent extremism. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_different_ways_governments_can_support_schools_teachers_052019_en.pdf

Rappaport, J. and Seidman, E. (2017). *Handbook of Community Psychology*. (Springer Science & Business Media).

Ravn, R., Coolsaet, R., and Sauer, T. (2019). 'Rethinking radicalisation: Addressing the lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalisation', in Clycq, N., Timmerman, C., Vanheule, D., Van Caudenberg, R., and Ravn, S. (eds.), *Radicalisation . A Marginal Phenomenon or a Mirror to Society?* (Leuven : Leuven University Press), 21-46.

Reinares, F., Alonso, R., Bjørgo, T., Della Porta, D., Coolsaet, R., Lohklker, R., Ranstorp, M., Schmid, A.P., Silke, A., Taarnby, M. and De Vries, G. (2008). Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism. A concise Report prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation.

Schmid, A.P. (2013). Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review. ICCT Research Paper. https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf

Sjøen, M. M., and Jore, S. H. (2019). Preventing extremism through education: exploring impacts and implications of counter-radicalisation efforts. Journal of Beliefs & Values. 40:3, 269-283, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2019.1600134

Vandenberghe, V. (2011). 'Inter-regional educational discrepancies in Belgium. How to combat them?', in De Grauwe, P. and Van Parijs, P. (eds.), *Educational Divergence: Why Do Pupils Do Better in Flanders Than in the French Community?*, (Re-Bel Initiative, e-Book 8), 5-25.

Vidino, L. (2010). The Role of Non-Violent Islamists in Europe. CTC Sentinel. 3(11): 9-11. https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2011/05/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss11-126.pdf

Weidman, J. C. (2006). 'Socialization of Students in Higher Education: Organizational Perspectives', in Conrad, C., C., and Serlin, R. C. (eds.). The Sage Handbook for Research in Education: Engaging Ideas and Enriching Inquiry. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 253-262.

About the authors

Irina van der vet is a Senior Project Researcher and Project Coordinator at the Institute for European Studies in Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB-IES). As a member of the Migration Diversity and Justice Cluster, she is currently leading projects-based research. Thematically, she is centering on national approaches in prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in the EU Member States against the overall EU counter-terrorism strategy.

Daisy Bisoffi is a Research Assistant at the VUB-IES. She is currently involved in project-based research, particularly within the framework of Horizon 2020 Mindb4Act project, with a focus on preventing radicalization and countering violent extremism. Prior to joining IES, she worked on civic empowerment, conflict management and mediation in Jordan; on human security and strategic communications at NATO; and on conflict prevention and sustaining peace at the United Nations.

Institute for European Studies

Pleinlaan 5

B-1050 Brussels

T: +32 2 614 80 01

E: info@ies.be

www.ies.be