

Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools

As the world faces new challenges with the growing threat of violent extremism, schools and educators are confronted with expressions and sentiments on a scale they never anticipated, ranging from personal identity conflicts to complex societal issues. The Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the two attacks in Denmark and the recent departure of several well-educated young Western girls to join the so called 'Islamic State' are only a few examples of developments our young people but also our educators are exposed to. These incidents scare, frustrate or anger people causing provocations, ridicule, tensions and protest in the classrooms. Schools and educators are on the front-line to help identify and safeguard youngsters at risk of radicalisation, and to partner in preventive efforts by investing at an early stage in teaching democracy, citizenship skills, and helping to develop critical thinking skills.

This manifesto is a **call to action** to help empower the very group of people who have the potential to be some of the most influential in the lives of our young people and to help them truly prevent violent extremism. As it is impossible for schools to solve the problem alone and immediately, on different levels (the educator, the school, the partners and the government) suggestions are made to inspire interventions that could start tomorrow (short term) and help establish a sustainable approach for the future (long term). These insights are mostly based on experiences in secondary education but can easily be translated to primary, vocational and higher education.

A draft of this manifesto was discussed by over 90 educators from close to all EU Member States, at the RAN conference on radicalisation and education (Manchester, 3-4 March 2015). The participants hope that their contribution will feed into both the first ever meeting of EU education ministers on radicalisation (Paris, 17 March 2015) and other processes of policy making, to ensure that the practices teachers have seen to work in their classrooms will be acknowledged and supported.

This manifesto is an overview of the opinions and feedback shared by the participants and experts involved. It is a result of this exercise and can not be attributed to the opinion of a specific expert, organisation, Member State or the RAN or EU as a whole.

The Educator

Educators play a key role in the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. They are confronted with extreme and sensitive ideas and behaviour of students in their classroom. Whatever the source of these expressions (grievance, injustices, group-pressure), the educator is challenged to identify and address these issues in a safe and open way. Leaving these expressions unchecked could feed the extremist narrative as well as jeopardize students' (social) safety. Educators need to invest in and receive support to increase their capacity to engage and act on this.

Promising interventions at the educator level:

1. *Invest in training*: educators can invest time to take part in extra training on these subjects. Schools and external partners, as well as educator-networks, can organise or facilitate these trainings.
2. *Holding difficult conversations*: educators should try starting a dialogue with their students about sensitive and difficult topics related to personal feelings, principles and beliefs. In many cases, it is worse to not respond and leave these kinds of sentiments and expressions unspoken. This does not only apply to religion, sociology teachers or counsellors, but is a responsibility of all educators regardless of their specialism.
3. *Offer alternatives*: educators can refer to organisations or NGO's that offer a suitable alternative to students that want to contribute to a cause (at home or abroad) and/or channel their sentiments of injustice. These students can be brought in to contact with, for example aid organisations that deliver supplies or refugee assistance in Syria and/or Iraq. Or they could be trained to become youth ambassadors and as 'anti-prejudice counsellors', for example.
4. *Build educator-networks and hotlines*: educators can help each other with difficult and sensitive issues to be discussed in the classroom. Whether these are colleagues from the same school or other schools, teachers should reach out to each other to share experiences and approaches. In some cases, it could be effective to involve another teacher in the discussion with the class.
5. *Discover online*: the current generation of students are very active online. As an educator it is useful to be aware of the different online platforms that students engage in and the content they are confronted with. Educators can also use this online material to start a conversation with their students about the need of critical approach about the online content – especially in the Social Media.
6. *Testimonials of victims or formers*: victims and survivors of terrorism, but also former extremists, can be of great value when they engage with classes where for example radicalisation or violent extremism gets ridiculed. Their testimonials, both online and offline, can have a big impact on the students and can also be a good opportunity to open the dialogue.

The School

All schools have the objective to provide a safe and respectful learning environment for their students. With regard to radicalisation leading to violent extremism, schools should make 'prevention' work fundamental and a priority.

Promising interventions at the school level:

7. *Develop a clear vision on how to deal with radicalisation and extremism in the school*: the board and the management of schools need to understand that recruitment and radicalisation is a risk for students, just as sexual exploitation and crime. They should develop a response structure for this based on prevention from the safeguarding and risks perspective. Schools should consider the mechanisms that they have available to provide a 'safe space' for these conversations to take place and should consider how this aligns with their policies and procedures. An approach that shuts down dialogue and expression could fuel frustration, whereas clear lines of engagement and management could help to deal with problems at the root cause.

8. *Innovate within the curriculum* to have built-in elements of critical thinking, democratic values, conflict resolution etc. as part of existing courses and activities. This should also enable teachers to spend time on these subjects instead of adding to the many topics teachers already have to deal with.
9. *The curriculum should be enriched by online tools*, to appeal to students and level with the fact that extremism profits from the Internet. A variety of online content countering extremist propaganda is available, and such counter narratives could be part of the curriculum, as input for discussion or otherwise. It is recommended that content is created and /or used that includes messengers credible to young people at risk of radicalisation, such as formers and community or religious key figures. Authorities, and even experts, are not best placed to be such messengers of counter narratives.
10. *As the curriculum is and should be limited, extracurricular activities should be utilised*. Debating and negotiating have proven to be of benefit for students vulnerable to extremism, as these extra-curricular activities provide them non-violent alternatives to problem solving.
11. *Enable educators to receive training* on holding difficult conversations, online processes and radicalisation awareness. Simply 'countering the narrative' alone does not work and can make young people defensive. Teachers must be equipped to facilitate dialogue and exchange in a safe and constructive manner. By ensuring that teachers understand the ingredients of 'effective' prevention, they can own the agenda and make sure that their lessons and approaches are appropriate.
12. *Lead by example* to create an open and safe space for school staff to also discuss and share experiences. This is no longer just a matter for the pastoral team. Schools should consider basic training for all teaching staff so that they are equipped to detect the signs and intervene effectively, and to also do this amongst themselves.
13. *Work together in robust partnerships* with other organisations such as social work, youth and health care, police, NGO's and municipalities to detect individuals at risk at an early stage and to involve these partners in a wider prevention and response structure in the school (e.g. invite social workers or police officers to talk in classrooms).
14. *Involve students in prevention initiatives*: those initiatives in school where young people are able to become positive influencers are often very successful as peer influence can be very powerful. There are successful practices of Jewish and Muslim students who jointly engage with vulnerable classrooms, and succeed in countering extremism in those classes.

The Partners

Schools cannot tackle these issues alone. A partnership approach will strengthen the response. Schools can be a valuable actor in prevention, but they are schools in the first place. Multiagency responses are needed to ensure all the right arrangements are in place to create a holistic approach to helping safeguard the individual.

Promising interventions at the partnership level:

15. *Cooperation between schools and law enforcement* is important but also a sensitive issue. They need one another in order to share information and ensure that support is in place for the most vulnerable and to help schools to make policies effective. This will lead to collaborative policies informed and 'bought into' by the education profession themselves and will help to prevent

security driven responses from undermining efforts in the classroom. This is important because too strong a security focus may foster an atmosphere of distrust within the school.

16. *Parents and family of students should be seen as valuable partners* in safeguarding and prevention. Too often these days there is a negative image portrayed of parents and families providing places for extremism to flourish. Although this possibility exists and schools should be aware of that, more often parents and families also have the best interest of their sons/daughters/family members at heart and they want to help keep them safe.
17. *NGO-s and other organisations* that focus on (supporting schools in) preventing radicalisation can be important partners because of their expertise and neutral role within the schools. Working together with these organisations, in- and outside the curriculum, can be mutually beneficial.
18. *Aid organisations and community initiatives offer alternatives* to students who want to contribute to a cause (at home or abroad) and who might be vulnerable for recruitment into extremist groups. Building close connections with these kinds of initiatives helps to offer alternatives to individuals at risk.
19. *In (secondary) teacher training attention* should be given to the subject of radicalisation and violent extremism to ensure future teachers have the tools to properly respond to expressions of grievance or injustice. The focus should not only be on the current generation of educators, but also on the next one.

The Government

At a policy level, the government is responsible for creating the conditions and pre-requisites schools and partners need to take an effective role in preventing radicalisation leading to violent extremism. The challenges at policy level are to keep a sustainable perspective in times of political pressure, to allow for a tailored approach within schools and to focus on facilitating schools instead of increasing measures to control them.

Promising interventions at the government level:

20. *Build a sustainable response*: after a terrorist or extremism incident, there is often a lot of attention, resources and focus on the role of education and how this could be strengthened. However, this is often too late and only by investing in long term prevention will schools be able to be effective.
21. *Define success on different levels*: it is important to define when schools are successful in their preventative role. This should not only be based on, for example, the number of people leaving to Syria, but also on the community, school and educator level. Success then will also depend on whether schools are in strong partnerships, whether there is an open and respectful climate in which difficult conversations can take place and whether educators are, and also feel, equipped to deal with these issues in their classrooms.
22. *Allow for tailored approaches within schools*: schools can be trusted to find the appropriate language to describe 'prevention' initiatives and they need time to build this in to their priorities. Safeguarding policies exist in many schools and this is an approach that members of the network advocate. Ultimately, schools need to have support available, but also the flexibility to allow them to implement action plans and policies that work. This will help ensure that young people, parents and families buy into this agenda.

23. *Foster innovation on a larger scale:* identify schools and partnerships that have effective interventions and facilitate the sharing and scaling of these interventions to other schools and stimulate further development.
24. *Invest in the future:* the traditional role of teachers and other educators should be evaluated. Current, global developments challenge the image of an educator that only transfers knowledge on a specific topic. The profession of educators needs to be more balanced between transferring knowledge and facilitating the development of life skills. One place to start with this is in the teacher training programmes.