

From Countering to Preventing Radicalization Through Education: Limits and Opportunities

Agnese Macaluso

Abstract

In recent years, Western societies in particular are witnessing an unprecedented emphasis on the need to find sustainable and effective strategies to tackle radicalization. This has led to an increase of interventions within the framework of education. Studies have shown that the relationship between education and radicalization is ambivalent, and there is no evidence that access to education may decrease the risk of radicalization. The limited understanding of radicalization processes has so far led to ineffective and even detrimental policies. Interventions mainly at the level of secondary and higher education have primarily sought to identify early signs of radicalization and to target vulnerable individuals, who often belong to the same religious or ethnic groups. These approaches have weakened social cohesion by demonizing certain communities and underscoring stereotypes. This paper argues that schools should not be a space to enforce counter racialization measures and promote a specific set of values and beliefs, but rather the opposite. Relying on evidence identified by research in the fields of education and peacebuilding, the paper argues that schools should be a forum in which values are questioned and openly discussed, in which critical thinking and the exchange of different ideas and perspectives are encouraged. Because education is paramount to shape values and behavior and to favor identity formation, this paper also advises shifting the focus of such preventive policies from secondary to primary education.

Keywords

Education, Radicalization, Conflict Prevention



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Agnese Macaluso is a researcher at The Hague Institute for Global Justice. She has experience on issues related to education, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and is involved in a number of projects in Democratic Republic of Congo, Macedonia and the MENA region among others. She has recently started to work on project that looks at human security and violent extremism, with a focus on education. She is also researching the role of education and employment interventions in promoting stability and has expertise on urban governance and the role of local institutions in conflict prevention.

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Introduction

Until recent years, research and policy debate primarily focused on preventing terrorism. Only in the last decade have terms such as *radicalization* and *violent extremism* begun to appear with more frequency in the political debate.¹ In the aftermath of 2001 terrorist attacks, the public discussion of the causes of terrorism was based on the assumption that the mindset of the perpetrators alone accounted for terrorism, which implies that potential terrorists “were unreportable and no political or economic change could stem their hatred.”² However, the need for new approaches that also take the social and cultural drivers of this phenomenon into account have created a space for new research perspective, including a renewed interest in education.

History shows that education can be decisive in determining the attitudes and behaviors of future generations. It can be used to foment social divisions, ethnic tensions, and even religious and political radicalization. In Libya, for example, the educational system and mass media are believed to have helped foment Arab nationalist feelings during the 1950s and 1960s.³ Europe also offers several examples of how education has been used to emphasize and perpetrate social tensions, whether with propaganda, as in Nazi Germany, or segregation, as in Bosnia. Evidence also shows, however, that education can also play an important role in responding to conflict and in creating a culture of peace and mutual respect.⁴ Recent initiatives, especially by the European Commission, have stressed the need to invest more in education to both create citizenship and prevent radicalization among youth.⁵ The UN Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, launched in December 2015, was a milestone for the recognition of quality education as an essential component of any preventive strategy.⁶ In the United Kingdom, the responsibility of schools to prevent extremism has now been enshrined in law in Section 26 of the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which requires that schools have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.”⁷ These and other initiatives indicate an emerging interest in tackling the issue at its root and addressing the process during its early stages. However, how and when education can be used to serve this purpose and the risks of generating counterproductive effects are each debated.

This paper contributes to the current policy debate by shedding light on the advantages and limitations of formal education as a platform for preventing radicalization. In terms of challenges, recent research has shown that access to education per se does not decrease the risk of radicalization, witness the many highly educated terrorists who have taken part in recent attacks. Interventions to increase access to schools and university would therefore not necessarily resolve the issue. In addition, the limited knowledge of radicalization processes has led to policies that target secondary schools and universities and aim at identifying potential radicals or children at risk. The emphasis on surveillance has been highly criticized on the grounds that certain groups are demonized and mutual mistrust is stimulated.

Educational interventions need to apply knowledge and evidence from the field of education in conflict prevention, peace education, and human rights education to the debate on countering violent extremism. Schools can be seen a social laboratory in which to develop critical thinking and even encourage positive conflict among students, who should be allowed to express their views and

1 Kris Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence,” monograph, (January 2012), <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/research-and-analysis/yjb/preventing-violent-extremism-systematic-review.pdf>.

2 Arun Kundnani, “Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept,” *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (October 1, 2012): 3–25, doi:10.1177/0306396812454984.

3 George Joffe, ed., *Islamist Radicalisation in North Africa: Politics and Process* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

4 Susan Fountain, “Peace Education In UNICEF” (New York: UNICEF, June 1999).

5 European Commission, “Fact Sheet: Tackling Radicalisation Through Education and Youth Action,” 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/news/2015/0422-education-europe_en.htm.

6 Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,” United Nations, April 2016, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism>.

7 UK Home Office, “Prevent Duty Guidance,” 23 March 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance>.

opinions, even when these go against those of the majority. In this sense, a constructive type of radicalization should be encouraged, one in which any view and position can be discussed and debated in a safe environment. Primary and not secondary education should be the main stage of intervention to contribute to countering violent extremism (CVE) policies and approaches.

The paper first introduces the concept of radicalization, its origin and current interpretations, and discuss the risks associated with too narrow or misleading definitions. It then looks at recent initiatives undertaken in Europe and especially in the United Kingdom to tackle radicalization in the context of higher education. This second section discusses the risks associated with approaches based on surveillance and the assumption that schools should be a space in which to identify potential radicals. Research and practice in peace education suggest that using schools as laboratories where positive confrontation and critical thinking are encouraged is the best way to build resilience against the push factors that can lead to radicalization. Taking these considerations into account, the paper elaborates on the need to shift the focus to primary education as a safer and more appropriate stage of intervention. The final section explores recommendations on education programming reform by building on existing good practices in Europe.

1. Radicalization: An Issue or a Possible Solution?

Despite growing emphasis and political will to invest in long-term preventive efforts, several challenges still hinder the design of effective approaches, and when and how education can be used as a successful tool to prevent radicalization and build resilience against extremism remain unclear. One major challenge is that there is still a poor understanding of the phenomenon. First, radicalization is a broad concept that refers to unconventional attitudes as well as to violence. One tendency is to associate radicalization only with jihadism and religious extremism, even though political extremism is and has historically been an even more frequent form of radicalization, especially in Europe. The term *radicalism* has been used since the nineteenth century to indicate innovative or revolutionary ideas, which explains why *radical* can also indicate a positive attitude rather than a prelude to violence.⁸ Historically, radical ideas have been the drivers of movements for workers' rights in France and the United Kingdom, black activists movement in the United States, or the radical feminism and radical pacifism of the 1870s.⁹ As Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock rightly point out, the recent emphasis on countering radicalization might undermine consensus for transformational educational practices which are essential to stimulate positive change. Examples comprise the democratic, feminist, and environmental ideologies, which were part of the radical tradition but are now the foundations of contemporary thinking.¹⁰

For Stijn Sieckelinck and his colleagues, “radicalization in a pedagogical sense occurs when a child starts to develop political or religious ideas and agency that are fundamentally different from the educational environments or mainstream’s expectations.”¹¹ This concept is important if we are to define the role of education in preventing radicalization, and to avoid the risk to design approaches that demonize the capacity to think outside conventional schemes and common belief. Professor Mohammed Farouk, vice chancellor of the Federal University of Kashere, Nigeria, explained it this way: “In my experience in Nigeria in the 1970s it was almost a rite of passage for students to become radicalized, to take on issues of social justice. Today, ‘radicalisation’ becomes equated with terrorism,

8 A. P. Schmidt, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013), <http://icct.nl/publication/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-a-conceptual-discussion-and-literature-review/>.

9 Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), .

10 Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, “The Deradicalisation of Education: Terror, Youth and the Assault on Learning,” *Race & Class* 57, no. 4 (2015): 22–38, doi:10.1177/0306396815621236.

11 Stijn Sieckelinck, Femke Kaulingfreks, and Micha de Winter, “Neither Villains Nor Victims: Towards an Educational Perspective on Radicalisation,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 63, no. 3 (2015): 329–43, doi:10.1080/00071005.2015.1076566.

violence. I see radicalisation as more of a process that challenges the status quo, rejects the status quo and takes on existing ideas in society. Radicalisation needs to be taken away from terrorism.”¹²

The term *radicalization* as we use it today was launched by the European Commission in its report “Terrorist recruitment: Addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalization,” which followed the Madrid train bombings of March 2004 and the London bombings of July 2005. Within a year of publication, the use of the term in the English language doubled.¹³ For Magnus Hörnqvist and Janne Flyghed, this suggests that “the ‘radicalisation’ concept mirrored an experienced need to identify home-grown terrorists at an early stage, before they could take action.”¹⁴ The concept of radicalization has therefore become very popular in the West to refer to homegrown terrorism and the issue of foreign fighters. A recent study commissioned by the City of New York defines the ideology behind radicalization as follows: “Jihadist or jihadi-Salafi ideology is the driver that motivates young men and women, born or living in the West, to carry out ‘autonomous jihad’ via acts of terrorism against their host countries. It guides movements, identifies the issues, drives recruitment and is the basis for action.”¹⁵

Although most of the existing research on radicalization focuses on Europe, the Middle East remains the primary source of foreign fighters—as many as eleven thousand—involved in the conflict in Syria, Jordan providing the most.¹⁶ It is therefore crucial to further research radicalization processes and dynamics across other parts of the world rather than treat it as only an EU security challenge. The term also seems to have different connotations and relevance depending on the geographical area. As the EU Expert Group on Radicalisation wrote in 2008, “Radicalisation is a context-bound phenomenon par excellence. Global, sociological and political drivers matter as much as ideological and psychological ones.”¹⁷ Even if we narrow the term to include only jihadist-led radicalization, no agreement has been reached on the role religious values and ideologies have in determining the decision to commit violent actions and join terrorist groups.¹⁸

An additional problem is the blurred distinction and relationship between radicalization and extremism. In Western societies, the concept of extremism is primarily used in policymaking and public discourse to refer to Muslims who are perceived to radically criticize Western culture or politics.¹⁹ For the UK government, extremism is defined as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.”²⁰ According to this interpretation, the list of values and behaviors that might be considered as extremist would be quite lengthy. The Dutch Security Service gives a similar definition: “Growing readiness to pursue and/or support—if necessary by undemocratic means—far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a threat to, the democratic order.”²¹ The terms *radicalization* and *extremism* are therefore used interchangeably to describe attitudes that contradict a set of values and beliefs typical of a given society.

12 British Council, “Education Is Best Possible Antidote to Radicalisation,” 2 June 2015, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/press/education-best-possible-antidote-radicalisation>.

13 Magnus Hörnqvist and Janne Flyghed, “Exclusion or Culture? The Rise and the Ambiguity of the Radicalisation Debate,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 3 (2012): 319–34, doi:10.1080/17539153.2012.717788.

14 *Ibid.*, 320.

15 Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat” (New York: OccupyBawlStreet.com Press, 2015).

16 Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” *ICSR*, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

17 Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, “Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism,” European Commission, March 2008, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20080500_cscp_report_vries.pdf.

18 Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (December 2011): 7–36, doi:10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1.

19 Arun Kundnani, *A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism* (Claystone, 2015).

20 UK Home Office and Theresa May, “A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values,” speech, 23 March 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-stronger-britain-built-on-our-values>.

21 Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 12.

Moreover, despite some discussion on the evolution of radicalization, no understanding has yet been reached of how radical ideas translate into violent actions. First, no single path leads toward terrorism, but instead many do; second, the boundary between violent and nonviolent radicalization can be extremely unclear, because individuals who are not physically committing terrorist acts themselves could have a role in recruiting or indoctrinating others and therefore represent an even bigger threat. John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University explains: “The idea that radicalization causes terrorism is perhaps the greatest myth alive today in terrorism research ... [First], the overwhelming majority of people who hold radical beliefs do not engage in violence. And second, there is increasing evidence that people who engage in terrorism don’t necessarily hold radical beliefs.”²²

For this reason, Anthony Richards suggests that we should avoid focusing on such controversial and unhelpful concepts and rather concentrate on antiterrorism strategies.²³ Although in his work Richards has well captured the challenges that still distinguish our understanding of radicalization processes, limiting our action to counterterrorism would not be responsible. Treating terrorism as a purely security issue has proven ineffective over the last decade. Not only does addressing the structural causes of terrorism require more emphasis on anti-radicalization, but radicalization in itself—though it may not always result into terrorist activities—can also lead to other forms of violence and be symptomatic of deep social, economic, and cultural tensions that could ultimately threaten peace.

The ambivalence and complexity of the concept, coupled with our limited knowledge of the drivers, processes, and outcomes linked to radicalization suggest not only that no blueprint from which to design policies and interventions exists, but also that a serious risk of unexpected and counterproductive effects does, especially when it comes to policies that affect children and young people, where the outcomes become apparent only in the long term.

2. The Dual Role of Education in Regard to Radicalization

2.1 Schools as Hotbeds of Extremist Ideas

Literature and practice usually show that unequal access to education can lead to conflict, especially in societies that are not fully integrated and in which social, religious, or economic differences persist.²⁴ The most recent EU Council Conclusions on Youth and Education again stresses the need to reduce early school leaving as a way to reduce marginalization and, in turn, the risk of radicalization.²⁵ However, the average high education of several of those who took part in the US and UK terrorist attacks indicate that access to school in itself, and specifically higher education, does not seem to reduce the chances of becoming radicalized.²⁶

Recent studies have also shown that education can improve the probability of successful attacks because it builds human capital and improves skills. Moreover, although individuals with little education are more likely to volunteer to join terrorist groups, recruiters prefer highly skilled individuals.²⁷ More generally, studies have shown that educated people are more prone to conflict than their less-educated counterparts because education creates expectations about professional and life standards, and, when these are not met, heightens dissatisfaction and frustration, which are often

22 John Knefel, “Everything You’ve Been Told About Radicalization Is Wrong,” *Rolling Stone*, 6 May 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/everything-youve-been-told-about-radicalization-is-wrong-20130506>.

23 Anthony Richards, “The Problem with ‘Radicalization’: The Remit of ‘Prevent’ and the Need to Refocus on Terrorism in the UK,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 143–52, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.00964.x.

24 Pyllis Kotite, “Education for Conflict Prevention and PeaceBuilding” (Paris: IIEP, 2002).

25 Council of the European Union, “Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council, 23-24/11/2015,” Meeting no. 3428, 23 November 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/eyscs/2015/11/23-24/>.

26 Alan B. Krueger, “What Makes a Homegrown Terrorist? Human Capital and Participation in Domestic Islamic Terrorist Groups in the U.S.A.,” working paper, Princeton University, September 1, 2008, <http://dataspace.princeton.edu/jspui/handle/88435/dsp012f75r8023>.

27 Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, “Human Capital and the Productivity of Suicide Bombers,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 223–38, doi:10.1257/jep.21.3.223.

drivers of violence.²⁸ This partly explains why, according to a recent study on the educational backgrounds of both violent and nonviolent Islamist activists in Muslim majority countries, engineers were more prone than others to become radicalized.²⁹ Not only have similar studies raised awareness that education is not an antidote to radicalization, they have also reversed the common thinking on education, in that the assumption behind many recent policies is now that schools can be hotbeds of radical ideas and networks.

Research on radicalization processes so far has been more conceptual than empirical, and no single pathway or explanatory theory exists that would apply to all groups or individuals.³⁰ However, part of the literature on Islamic extremism suggests that it is during adolescence that radicalization processes take place. For example, Mitchell Silber and Arwen Bhatt identify four phases that distinguish the radicalization process: pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, and jihadization.³¹ The first two phases, during which ideas and potential radical attitudes take shape, occur between fifteen and thirty-five years of age, corresponding to high school and university students. This study, remarkably, also confirms that most radicalized people have completed secondary or higher education. These findings have led some European countries to invest in secondary and higher education as part of their counter-radicalization strategies.

The Norwegian Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism has asked the Directorate for Education and Training to develop digital teaching resources on radicalization and violent extremism for lower secondary school and upper secondary education and training. Law faculties are also required to provide relevant and updated information on radicalization to their students.³² The focus on the need to start debating controversial themes has been encouraged across several secondary schools in the UK, witness the British *Watch Over Me*, a DVD designed to help secondary school teachers discuss challenging topics such as terrorism.³³ Introducing contested topics such as extremism, xenophobia, or integration into school debate is important and even necessary. However, most anti-radicalization measures in Europe so far foresee a security component in which radical and suspect attitudes are identified and referred to the authorities.³⁴ In particular, universities have been the target of several governmental initiatives to challenge extremist ideologies in the campus and improve capacity to detect potentially radical attitudes among university students. Several initiatives on campus relations and counter extremism have been designed since 2008.³⁵

In 2009, the UK's Association of Chief Police officers published guidelines to improve cooperation between teachers and police to tackle radicalization among youth, according to which police would monitor children's use of the internet and attend after-school activities with children considered at risk.³⁶ In 2001, the review of the prevention program even led to a new unit within the Ministry of Education dedicated to preventing extremism that also recruited former members of the British security service.³⁷ As Katherine Brown and Tania Saeed observe, such an approach can lead to

28 Lyndsay McLean Hilker and Erika McAslan Fraser, "Youth Exclusion, Violence, Conflict and Fragile States," Social Development Direct, 30 April 2009, <http://www.gsdc.org/docs/open/con66.pdf>.

29 Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection Between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

30 Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 2004).

31 Silber and Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West*.

32 Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, "Action Plan Against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism," July 2014, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/Action-plan-against-Radicalisation-and-Violent-Extremism/id762413/>.

33 UK Home Office, "Prevent Duty Guidance."

34 Netherlands Ministry of Security and Justice, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, "Dutch Government Strengthens Actions to Combat Jihadism and Radicalisation," press release, 4 September 2014, https://english.nctv.nl/current_topics/press_releases/2014/Dutchgovernmentstrengthensactionstocombatjihadismradicalisation.aspx.

35 UK Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, "Counter Extremism : The Role of Further Education Providers in Promoting Community Cohesion, Fostering Shared Values and Preventing Violent Extremism: Consultation Document," 2008, <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/46/the-role-of-further-education-providers-in-promoting-community-cohesion-fostering-shared-values-and-preventing-violent-extremism-consultation-document>.

36 Sukarieh and Tannock, "The Deradicalisation of Education."

37 Ibid.

securitized student life and even greater fragmentation into different communities, especially since Muslim communities have been targeted.³⁸ Similar approaches have been introduced in the UK in primary schools as well. The EU-funded project Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism Programme circulated in East London primary schools surveys to identify “initial seeds of radicalization” among nine- to eleven-year-old children.³⁹

From a pedagogic point of view, judging adolescents for their subversive views or activities is highly contested, because young people, to successfully negotiate the transition from childhood to the adult world, usually perform an array of developmental tasks and processes that can include temporary attitudes or behaviors that might be considered radical.⁴⁰ The interventions described are also based on the assumption that it is possible to detect and recognize radical attitudes and behavior, and that teachers and schools directors have the skills to do so. There is not only no objective way to measure radicalization, but also a risk associated with personal interpretations by individuals who could themselves act on the basis of assumptions and prejudices or have personal reasons to refer or not to refer a child to the authorities.

Paradoxically, interventions in the context of education, instead of promoting values such as inclusion, respect for diversity, and tolerance are de facto encouraging the stigmatization of communities or the entrenching of differences and fear, which are, as Richards argues, often considered the main counterproductive effects of anti-radicalization programs.⁴¹ The fear of being considered different or suspected of radical attitudes is also likely to keep students from sharing their ideas and behaving naturally, and might pressure them to comply with expectations while they are at school. Moreover, the limited focus on preschool and primary school children leaves little space for investing in prevention, to better generate positive attitudes and behavior in the first place rather than trying to correct or repress them once they are already formed. In conclusion, such approaches would undermine the goal of detecting signs of radicalization because they would both push students to adjust to expectations and subvert some of the skills that ultimately help resist radicalization: critical thinking and the ability to engage with diversity.

3. From Countering to Preventing Radicalization: The Potential of Education

3.1 Understanding the Role of Education in Preventing and Mitigating Conflict

Despite the lack of a “recipe” to prevent or eradicate radicalization, knowledge is extensive on how education can help address some of the drivers to racialization, such as feelings of exclusion and perceived inequality, lack of civic identity, and the need to belong to a group or community. The literature on peace education suggests that education can offset these factors by raising awareness, generating respect for others, and creating and maintaining cultures of peace and dialogue.⁴² More specifically, education can play a significant role in mitigating conflict at three levels: structural, behavioral, and attitudinal. It can strengthen social cohesion and citizen trust in institutions (structural), improve interactions among students (behavioral), and promote inclusiveness and respect

38 Katherine E. Brown and Tania Saeed, “Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization at British Universities: Muslim Encounters and Alternatives,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 11 (2015): 1952–68, doi:10.1080/01419870.2014.911343.

39 Diane Taylor, “Fury After Primary Pupils Are Asked to Complete Radicalisation-Seeking Surveys,” *Guardian*, 28 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/may/28/fury-after-primary-pupils-are-asked-to-complete-radicalisation-seeking-surveys>.

40 John P. Kempf, “Erik H. Erikson. Identity, Youth and Crisis.,” *Behavioral Science* 14, no. 2 (1969): 154–59, doi:10.1002/bs.3830140209.

41 Richards, “The Problem with ‘Radicalization.’”

42 Naureen Chowdbury Fink, Ivo VeenKamp, Wedad Ahlassen, Rafia Barakat, and Sara Zeiger, “The Role of Education in Countering Violent Extremism,” *Global Center on Cooperative Security*, December 2013, http://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Dec13_Education_Expert_Meeting_Note.pdf.

for diversity (attitudinal).⁴³ Promoting an equal access to education, favoring mixed classes, and creating spaces for socialization are crucial components of any educational strategy that strives to build peace. Education should be seen as a continuous learning process. It is therefore essential to design approaches that take into account not only the critical phase, which often corresponds to secondary schools, but also and most importantly primary schools. Schools are laboratories in which children experiment with diversity, empathy, and more generally interactions, both with their peers and with authorities. Schools should therefore train children to experience life in the far more complex scenario of societies, providing them with social skills, which are often overlooked in the context of formal education and are certainly underestimated during early years.

Teaching values is also crucial in helping children develop attitudes and behaviors conducive to peace. As Stijn Sieckelinck, Femke Kaulingfreks, and Micha de Winter explain, “unlike many gang activity [*sic*] or hooliganism, [radicalisation] is always value loaded, politically oriented, historically situated and driven by ideals.”⁴⁴ However, values and ideas should not be imposed or taken for granted, as was the tendency in the UK and France where, after terrorist attacks, measures were undertaken to promote national values in schools.⁴⁵ Theorists of radical education in the 1970s already advocated for a problem-posing education where “men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation.”⁴⁶ The need to develop critical thinking and think beyond clichés and recurring ideas is critical to building citizenship in complex and articulated communities.⁴⁷ Even if decisions on which outcomes should be desirable are embedded in a system of values and can differ from person to person, an extensive literature illustrates how and why critical thinking can make desirable outcomes more likely.⁴⁸ Also, as Alex Molnar explains, “according to the research literature critical thinking is best cultivated in a school environment that encourages students to ask questions, to think about their thought processes, and thus to develop habits of mind that enable them to transfer the critical thinking skills they learn in class to other, unrelated, situations.”⁴⁹

Values and ideas should be confronted, and constantly questioned. Schools should provide a safe space for discussion and confrontation where pupils are asked to test their critical sense and think beyond taboos and common assumptions. Although no empirical evidence indicates that critical thinking can make individuals immune to radicalization, enough evidence suggests that this skill can definitely help resist its typical pull factors. Professor Richardson, recently nominated as the next vice chancellor of the University of Oxford, observed that “Any terrorist I have ever met through my academic work had a highly over simplified view of the world, which they saw in black and white terms. Education robs you of that simplification and certitude. Education is the best possible antidote to radicalization.”⁵⁰

43 Kendra Dupuy, “Education for Peace Building Peace and Transforming Armed Conflict Through Education Systems” (Oslo: Save The Children Norway, 2009).

44 Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks, and Winter, “Neither Villains Nor Victims,” 338.

45 French Ministry of Education, “Onze Mesures Pour Une Grande Mobilisation de l’École Pour Les Valeurs de La République,” Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale, de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de La Recherche, January 2015, <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid85644/onze-mesures-pour-un-grande-mobilisation-de-l-ecole-pour-les-valeurs-de-la-republique.html>; UK Home Office, “A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values.”

46 Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000); Henry Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling, A Critical Reader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

47 For Lynn Davies, to combat radicalization, schools need to adopt the following types of criticality: critical scholarship—a sound political education that includes conflict studies, comparative religion, non-nationalistic citizenship and political skills; critical (dis)respect—a sound understanding of universal rights and responsibilities; critical thinking—the skills to weigh up alternative ideals and the means to pursue them; critical doubt—the acceptance that ideals should be provisional; and, finally, critical lightness—the acceptance that ideals and their holders may be mocked. “Educating Against Extremism: Towards a Critical Politicisation of Young People,” *International Review of Education* 55, no. 2/3 (2009): 183–203

48 Diane F. Halpern, *Thought and Knowledge: An Introduction to Critical Thinking*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

49 Alex Molnar, Faith Boninger, and Joseph Fogarty, “The Educational Cost of Schoolhouse Commercialism,” *National Education Policy Center*, 7 November 2011, iii, <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/schoolhouse-commercialism-2011>.

50 British Council, “Education Is Best Possible Antidote.”

3.2. *Schools as Spaces Where Radical Ideas Should Be Aired, Not Suppressed*

In multiethnic societies, such as those of contemporary European cities, it is particularly urgent to consider how values and norms promoted in schools are the product of a particular culture and might not be perceived as universal. From early years forward, schools should be places where values can be openly discussed and criticized, and where nontraditional views and opinions should be aired rather than repressed. An excellent example of the value of this approach can be observed if we consider for instance human rights education (HRE). As Lynn Davies pointed out in 2010, HRE is particularly relevant in terms of promoting free and critical thinking. The latter goes against the unilateral approach of extremist thinking, but is also different from what she calls multicultural education, which builds on group distinctions and differences.⁵¹ In her view, that human rights can be seen as a neutral, secular framework makes HRE more universal and not directly associated with particular religious or cultural values.⁵² This statement is quite controversial because defining what constitutes a right can be contested. Furthermore, it could be argued that the modern human rights agenda has been set by a particular culture with a specific history. HRE should instead create a safe space for discussion, but also critically review, test, and discuss our understandings and perceptions of human rights and the way they can be applied in different societies. Also, it is important not to see this interaction as a way to mobilize minority groups and awake their conscience only, but rather as a necessary step to tackle issues of segregation and lack of integration and hostility that are often perpetrated by the majority groups, and that can ultimately lead to fragmented and polarized societies.

An uncritical application of human rights can in fact present serious challenges. An interesting example is the freedom of speech and expression, which has always been recognized and celebrated as one of the founding principles of democracy and an inalienable right of every individual. In the current context, a misuse or extensive interpretation of this right can lead to critical situations and eventually violence. Episodes such as the attack on the satiric journal *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, or the death threat by Christian fundamentalists to the author of *Jerry Springer the Opera* indicate how controversial and sensitive freedom of expression can be and how important it is to raise awareness on the risks it can imply when going against peoples or groups with a different perception of this right.⁵³ Human rights should therefore be contextualized, unpacked, and brought into discussion under the vigilance of teachers and in the safe space of the classroom.

These considerations do not minimize the importance of free interaction and exchange of ideas. On the contrary, the latter are instrumental to defining identities. When researching the root causes of radicalization, very often the lack of integration and the identification with other groups and values have proved to be among its key drivers. This is particularly evident in the case of the foreign fighters. According to Davies, the issue depends on both the identities we choose for ourselves and those we ascribe to others. Rather than multiple identities, she suggests the concept of a *hybrid identity*, which entails a combination and transformation of one's own identity rather than the addition of new ones.⁵⁴ Her suggestion is timely and important, especially for the highly multiethnic and cultural contexts in which we live. In line with this approach, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recently began advocating for an emerging approach to education known as Global Citizenship Education to stimulate in pupils a sense of belonging to the global community and society and promote collective identity.⁵⁵

51 James A. Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1994).

52 Lynn Davies, "The Potential of Human Rights Education for Conflict Prevention and Security," *Intercultural Education* 21, no. 5 (2010): 463–71, doi:10.1080/14675986.2010.521388.

53 Dan Bilefsky and Maïa De La Baume, "Terrorists Strike Charlie Hebdo Newspaper in Paris, Leaving 12 Dead," *New York Times*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/08/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-paris-shooting.html>; Owen Gibson, "Abusive Calls Give BBC Chiefs a Jerry Springer Moment," *Guardian*, January 10, 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/jan/10/broadcasting.bbc>.

54 Davies, "Educating Against Extremism."

55 "Global Citizenship Education," UNESCO, 16 October 2015, <http://en.unesco.org/gced>.

4. Practical Recommendations and Best Practices

Given the challenges and opportunities that education offers as a tool to prevent radicalization, this section provides some possible recommendations for policy and practice.

First is the need to invest more in primary education, because attitudes and behaviors as well as identity normally take shape during childhood. Childhood is also when parents are most involved with their children's schools. Normally in these early years parents are more sensitive to programs and initiatives that aim to involve them and establish links between their households and schools. Clearly, building this kind of resilience requires strong ties between schools, families, and other segments of society that influence and shape children's attitudes and behavior. Schools are only one of the actors or entities that should be involved, however. If peers can be determinant in influencing adolescents' attitudes and behaviors, the family is the child's primary example and guide. Formal education should complement the education children received in their households and immediate environments. However, no clear evidence of how much depends on each has been found. Studies indicate that most young radicals were raised in one single-parent family, suggesting that the lack of a traditional family context could increase chances of supporting radical ideologies.⁵⁶ Conversely, a research carried out in the Netherlands, Denmark, and the UK sees no linear relationship between certain types of family or child-raising practices and radicalization.⁵⁷ Another recent study on young people joining al-Shabaab reported that in most cases parents played a very limited role in the political choice of their children, and 80 percent of the time did not even know about their children's involvement.⁵⁸

A second recommendation is to encourage critical thinking and unconventional perspectives. The design of curricula and especially the content of history programs can be decisive in shaping identities and feelings of ownership, especially in highly diversified communities. Critically discussing historical events; being confronted with responsibility; addressing issues such as prejudice, racism, and exploitation are all important activities to stimulate dialogue and active citizenship. The initiative Facing History and Ourselves has generated innovative and useful toolkits to help teachers discuss contested historical events such as the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide.⁵⁹ Similar tools could be adapted, for example, to teach colonial history in European countries, where children from former colonies often represent a large group.

The importance of understanding the past thorough education does not negate the need to engage with topical issues. Media education is crucial both to analyze propaganda and to appreciate freedom of speech and critique. At the same time, certain dangers are associated with the use and content of journal articles and non-approved materials. It is essential that school managers and teachers understand the complexity and nature of the issue before any method, approach, or strategy can be implemented in the classrooms. A third recommendation thus refers to the role of teachers, because these activities should not be an occasional deviation from the program by open-minded educators, but should rather become an institutionalized practice, because the risks of causing counterproductive effects are significant. It is not a case that the Manifesto for Education—Empowering Educators and Schools, published by the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network, opens by stating the need to inform

⁵⁶ Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks, and Winter, "Neither Villains Nor Victims."

⁵⁷ Family can play a crucial role in determining or preventing radical attitudes among their children. A study carried out in Netherlands, UK and Denmark has analyzed this correlation in the three countries; Stijn Sieckelinck and Marion Van San, "Formers and Families. Transitional Journeys in and out of Extremisms in the United Kingdom, Denmark and the Netherlands," ResearchGate, 11 November 2015,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283666698_Formers_and_FamiliesTransitional_journeys_in_and_out_of_extremisms_in_the_United_Kingdom_Denmark_and_the_Netherlands.

⁵⁸ Anneli Botha, "Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization Among Individuals Who Joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (November 2, 2014): 895–919, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.952511.

⁵⁹ "About Us," Facing History and Ourselves, <https://www.facinghistory.org/about-us>.

and train teachers as a first step to tackle radicalization.⁶⁰ Governments, especially in the UK, have already made considerable investments in initiatives and resources that can help teachers and guardians understand the issue and adopt sensitive methodologies and language when approaching such sensitive themes.⁶¹ The recently published UNESCO teacher guide on the prevention of violent extremism is a valuable related resource and a testament to the importance of adequate preparation to teachers and guardians, especially on how to discuss themes related to extremism and violence.⁶² More experimental activities should also be considered, but with caution and in the context of a broader program to address radicalization as well as other social issues. For example, during secondary education, initiatives that emphasize risks and consequences drawn from real-life experiences seem to have had important deterrent effects. Stijn Sieckelinck and Marion van San suggest that, in the opinion of former radicals, direct confrontation with possible consequences of this lifestyle would be more effective than trying to moralize the young.⁶³

Finally, interventions tailored to children at risk and paternalistic (and often rhetorical) lessons on dangers of racialization can accentuate fragmentation and lead indirectly to the demonization of certain groups, especially if specific religious or ethnic communities are targeted. Such approaches risk to aggravate a sense of marginalization and further undermine social integration while triggering feelings of xenophobia and hostility among the majority groups. In this respect, promoting ownership and encouraging their proactive role rather than considering them as targets or beneficiaries of the interventions can be much more effective in producing positive change. An inspiring example is provided by the community organization Minhaj-ul-Quran International, based in the UK, which has launched a counterterrorism curriculum aiming at countering extremist ideology through teaching Islamic theology.⁶⁴

Conclusions

The recent emphasis on the need to switch from a counterterrorism or security approach toward measures that tackle the radicalization process have renewed interest in the role of education in addressing some of the underlying causes of radicalization. However, the too narrow interpretation of radicalization and the limited understanding of racialization processes hamper the design of effective preventive strategies, including those based on education. Most of the measures enforced so far in Europe in fact focus on countering radicalization and using schools to identify individuals or groups who might have radical attitudes, rather than investing in prevention. These approaches are particularly detrimental because they prescribe a specific code of conduct and assume that one would support a set of values and believes and, if not, should be considered as a concern and a potential threat to the society. It is not a coincidence that, according to such vision, many minority groups, primarily Muslim students, have been targeted disproportionately.

Furthermore, as the history of the last two centuries shows, thinking critically, supporting different ideas, and even opposing the system have been critical in promoting modernization and are essential tools in resisting the pull factors of radicalization. Schools should in fact be safe spaces where opinions and points of view are free to emerge and can be confronted in an open and constructive way. They should ideally be used as social laboratories where children develop social skills and are trained

60 EUROCLIO, "Manifesto for Education: Empowering Educators and Schools," European Association of History Educators, 14 March 2016, <http://euroclio.eu/2016/03/european-commissions-radicalisation-awareness-network-education-meets-goteborg/manifesto-for-education-empowering-educators-and-schools/>.

61 UK Home Office, "Learning Together to Be Safe: A Toolkit to Help Schools Contribute to the Prevention of Violent Extremism," Radicalisation Research, 15 June 2016, <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/regions/learning-together-to-be-safe-a-toolkit-to-help-schools-contribute-to-the-prevention-of-violent-extremism/>.

62 UNESCO, "UNESCO Launches Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism," Education Sector press release, 4 May 2016, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/resources/online-materials/single-view/news/unesco_launches_teachers_guide_on_the_prevention_of_violent_extremism/#.V6R6uPI96M8.

63 Sieckelinck and San, "Formers and Families."

64 Samira Shackle, "Is Teaching a Counter-Terrorism Curriculum the Best Way to Stop Young People Being Radicalised?" New Statesman, 24 June 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/06/teaching-counter-terrorism-curriculum-best-way-stop-young-people-being>.

in civic participation. In particular, primary education is a necessary, even critical stage of intervention because of its potential to influence and shape attitudes and behaviors. During this phase, children begin developing identities, which is crucial to their integration into society. This phase also reflects the need to align counter-radicalization efforts—more common in secondary school programs—with preventive efforts. Teaching peace values and combining efforts at school and at home during a child’s early years prepare children for adolescence, when they will be confronted with choices, competing ideologies, and different forms of social pressure.

More research is needed before we can design effective and safe educational tools to respond to radicalization. However, drawing on existing knowledge of and practice in education and peacebuilding should be a priority for any government that wants to invest in prevention and resilience. Several best practices and tools are available and could be easily included in or used to inspire educational programs. Research is also needed to identify how education could be complemented by other forces, such as civil society engagement and community-building efforts. This would also help mitigate the possible side effects of traditional top-down counter-radicalization measures, and will ensure a more effective uptake of the lessons learned in schools. In particular, local administrations can play a critical role in tailoring education programs to the specific needs and peculiarities of local communities, promoting not only context-sensitive curricula but also local ownership of these initiatives.

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