



Participation

Guide for Teachers and Schools

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Summary of the Project

The overarching objective of **PARTICIPATION** is to identify future perspectives and trends of polarisation, extremism and radicalisation as well as the social composition of the groups at risk of VE in Europe by a participatory and provisional methodological strategy, that permits the cocreation of effective strategies for prevention with social actors, stakeholders and policy-makers. The specific objectives of **PARTICIPATION** are:

1. **Multidimensional modelling to understand current and future trends of extremism, polarisation and radicalisation:** to develop a holistic multidimensional model based on participatory fieldwork and mixed-method approaches, in order to better understand the different drivers of violent radical ideologies, how these are organized in different pathways and, complementary to that, which mechanisms, factors and strategies contribute to support non radical attitudes and behaviours, nowadays and in the future.
2. **Communication dynamics:** to develop an analysis of extremism, polarisation and radicalisation on-line dynamics by ICT tools (as semantic analysis) and to co-create with the involvement of civil society strategies to contrast and preventing these phenomena.
3. **Co-creation:** fieldwork to analyse and, with the involvement of social actors in different social spheres to generate, to generate strategies of contrasting polarisation, extremism and radicalization.
4. **Tools:** to develop methodologies and policy recommendations for improving the action of policy-makers also on the basis of the previous field-work.
5. **Dissemination:** to disseminate step-by-step the results toward civil society, stakeholders, policymakers, social groups, schools, experts, and scientific communities through their active involvement in discussion and forum, both online and offline, as well as workshops and focus group discussions.



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List of abbreviations

Acronym	Description
EU	European Union
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation



Executive summary

NB= Max 1 Page

Objectives

Description

Results and conclusions



Introduction

Scope and Objectives

This guide is intended to support school teachers and education professionals address radicalisation, polarisation and social inclusion in schools. According to Van Alstein (2019), dealing with polarisation, radicalisation, and extreme viewpoints is part of the challenges teachers face in the classroom and ‘the first challenge for teachers when this happens is find out how deeply rooted these convictions are’¹.

The notion that schools and educational institutions can play an important role in the prevention of violent radicalisation and extremism has gained increasing ground in recent years. One step along the way was the UN Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism², which emphasised the significance of schooling and education in building the resilience of children and young people.

This guide draws, amongst others, on the rich findings of the **PARTICIPATION** project, including consolidated lessons, best practices, tips and links to online resources and further supporting materials from relevant studies, organisations and events, including those produced in the framework of RAN, the European Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network, which since 2011 has been the central body for the EU Member States’ coordinated efforts to prevent and counter radicalisation and extremism of both political and religious observance and furthermore, with both Islamist, right-wing extremist and left-wing extremist signs, as they appeared in Europe and the rest of the world for decades.

Methods and Guide Outline

As with other deliverables within the framework of PARTICIPATION, research for this guide stems from the assumption that polarising discussions and contentious topics in the school environment, if not properly addressed, may produce a more polarised and radicalised setting for learning and education, even triggering violence. They may moreover produce biases, skewed and discriminatory worldviews of youth, which affect their entire life³. Indeed, the school can be seen as a microcosm of society, which brings together many worldviews, ways of thinking and living, thus becoming a place that encapsulates social difference, where various conflicts may arise on a regular basis. For these reasons, and considering that particularly secondary school students are in a period of developing identities, beliefs, values, and opinions, this work proposes a set of actions for teachers and educators when confronted with challenges and contentious topics that may lead to polarisation and extremism.

¹ Marteen Van Alstein, Controversy and polarisation in the classroom. Suggestions for pedagogical practice, op. cit., 10 (qtd in D3.4).

² Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2014). Report of the Secretary-General (A/70/674) http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178_2014_EN.pdf

³ Farinelli, Francesco, ed. (2022). Building Resilience and Prevention in Schools (PARTICIPATION, Deliverable 3.4)

The objective of this Guide is to fill, to the extent possible, a gap in existing national approaches and strategies. As shown through the findings of the research conducted in a selection of countries and case studies in the context of the PARTICIPATION project thus far, though some national efforts to address the factors leading to radicalisation in schools do exist, a whole-school and well-coordinated approach is still missing. Available programmes either cover only some of the aspects of the phenomenon under the overarching umbrella of ‘human rights protection’, or are inadequately updated to address the current climate of deep polarisation, disinformation, rise of conspiratorial and far-right thinking and accelerated spread of hate affecting youth. At the same time – and of high relevance to the role of teachers – not all groups of professionals are supported with trainings, tools and guidelines on the ways in which they can contribute to prevention of radicalisation or polarisation⁴.

The Guide is structured as follows:

Chapters 2,3 and 4 focus on the definitions of the key concepts used: radicalisation, polarisation and social inclusion. In addition to discussing the different dimensions of these processes, the chapters explain the challenges that radicalisation and polarisation may pose in the classroom, while offering some indications of the early warning signs of such processes in students. Chapter 5 is divided in two parts: the first part provides some practical information about the steps teachers and educators should take in cases of concern; while the second part is dedicated to the pedagogical approaches to help teachers address and build resilience around radicalisation and polarisation. Chapter 6 then focuses on the potential challenges that may arise in teachers’ efforts, offering some solutions and best practices. Finally, the Conclusions discuss the limits of this Guide and provide some further sources.

What is radicalisation?

Radicalisation has become a catchphrase, used to encompass a number of behaviours, beliefs and expressions. The term is often also used interchangeably with ‘extremism’, ‘violent extremism’ or even ‘terrorism’.

Radicalism and radicalisation are not themselves a direct cause of concern, as they can also express an innovative, positive perspective or purpose on societal triggers and democratic thinking. Radical thought that does not condone the exercise of violence, discrimination or bias to further political goals may be seen as normal and acceptable, and be promoted by groups working within the boundaries of the law⁵. However, when the process of radicalisation leads to violence and hate crimes, it may risk breaching basic rights and freedoms of others.

Indeed, one of the difficulties with the term ‘radicalisation’ is that the end result is not clear. One common understanding is that a person has been radicalised once they hold extremist beliefs,

⁴ For more details, see Doufexi Kaplani *et al* (2022). Guidance Note on Developing More Effective Educational and Learning Policies and Interventions. PARTICIPATION Deliverable 5.3.

⁵ UNESCO (2016). A Teacher’s Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism.

although extremism, is in general defined in restrictive manners. While radicalisation is thus seen as a *process*, extremism is rather considered as a *product* of the radicalisation process.

Why should we be concerned about radicalisation?

Radicalisation is a concern both because of its effects on those who might be radicalised and become involved in terrorist-related activity, as well as those who fall victim to terrorist violence. According to the UK Government's Counter-Extremism Strategy, we should also be concerned about radicalisation's impact on community cohesion more generally. Terrorist propaganda seeks to create 'in-group' and 'out-group' identities. This paints the out-group as markedly opposed to the in-group and therefore a threat. In turn, this creates fractures in community cohesion and is used to justify violent action against a dehumanised 'enemy'⁶.

Youth are the main targets of recruitment by violent extremists, they themselves may fall victim to extremist violence, and can also be the perpetrators of extremist violence.

The school and the classroom create the perfect environment to facilitate a safe discussion on radicalisation and violence terrorism because it can be situated in a well-prepared, thought-out and conscious pedagogical strategy. In this way, teachers can address ideological, political and social biases that lead to radicalization and violence, respond to cognitive gaps that often accompany this process or identify personal and familial circumstances which make youth more vulnerable to such phenomena. In fact, as stated by RAN, schools are labs for democracy and companions to prevent violent radicalisation through education⁷. So, at the preventive level, the school should first and foremost carry out its basic pedagogical function and work actively and systematically to prevent lack of wellbeing, adaptability difficulties and other risk factors among the students⁸.

Detecting early signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in your students

There's no single way of identifying whether a student is likely to be vulnerable to radicalisation. Specifically, it is important to look for signs of hate, bias, misogyny, racial and gender slurs, attractions to discriminatory political views and actors etc. These would be red flags that also make it less difficult to distinguish between exploratory radical thought or expression and truly problematic behaviours with dangerous consequences. It is important to take into account that the process of radicalisation can take place over an extended period or it can happen very quickly – either face-to-face or online, usually both. Increased online presence – something that went up dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic – may also expose young people to a wider range of extremist content.

The UK Government's Department for Education has dedicated a special section of its website addressed to educators to 'Understanding and Identifying Radicalisation Risk in your Education

⁶ Welsh Government (2015). A Teacher's Guide to Understanding the Role of the Internet in Radicalisation and Extremism.

⁷ Nordbruch, G., & Sieckelinck, S. (2018). Transforming schools into labs for democracy, Policy Paper. Brussels: RAN Centre of Excellence. [Transforming schools into labs for democracy \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/eu-press/en/articles/transforming-schools-into-labs-for-democracy)

⁸ PRACTICE Teachers Handbook – Guidelines for Prevention Work (2021).

Setting⁹. The section makes a crucial distinction between “push” and “pull” risk factors that can make a young person at risk of radicalisation. Specifically:

Push factors may include a young person feeling:

- Isolated; a sense of injustice;
- they do not belong; confused about life or the world;
- they have no purpose; real or perceived personal grievances.
- low self-esteem;
- their aspirations are unmet;
- anger or frustration;

Pull factors could include an extremist or terrorist group, organisation or individual:

- offering a sense of community and a support network;
- promising fulfilment or excitement;
- making the child, young person or adult learner feel special and part of a wider mission;
- offering a very narrow, manipulated version of an identity that often supports stereotypical gender norms;

It is important to mention here that, drawing on PARTICIPATION findings, gender plays a central role in the ongoing process of re-assemblage particularly of the far-right in Europe, while it is also being exploited – albeit with much more nuanced approaches – by other types of political extremism, such as the far left. As the D4.4 report indicates¹⁰, anti-gender (including anti-LGBTQI+) ideology is in fact a ‘symbolic glue’ building on and articulating deep-rooted fears of economic, social, cultural and ethnic mosaics in the EU. As such, and according to the same report, it is exploited in many – and sometimes contradictory – ways, while providing a common ideological background.

- offering inaccurate answers or falsehoods to grievances;
- encouraging conspiracy theories;
- promoting an ‘us vs. them’ mentality;
- blaming specific communities for grievances;
- encouraging the use of hatred and violent actions to get justice;
- encouraging ideas of supremacy.

According to the PRACTICE guide¹¹, experts are generally debating whether it is possible to identify actual signs of violent radicalisation that could be a guideline for schools and teachers when they

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-prevent-duty-safeguarding-learners-vulnerable-to-radicalisation/understanding-and-identifying-radicalisation-risk-in-your-education-setting#:~:text=peers%20promoting%20an%20extremist%20ideology,violent%20activity%20in%20overs eas%20settings>

¹⁰ Marinon, L. et al (2022). The Gender Dimension in Extremist and Radical Propaganda. PARTICIPATION Deliverable 4.4.

¹¹ PRACTICE Teachers Handbook – Guidelines for Prevention Work (2021).

are concerned about a student. However, it is possible to mention some general points of attention, which should always be used with caution in order to avoid that a vulnerable student turns their back on the school and moves into a deeper radicalisation process.

The UNESCO guide for teachers¹² provides a list of *behaviours* that may be signs and red flags of radicalisation, including:

- Sudden break with the family and long-standing friendships;
- Sudden drop-out of school and conflicts with the school;
- Change in behaviour relating to food, clothing, language, and finances;
- Changes in attitudes and behaviour towards others: antisocial comments, rejection of authority, refusal to interact socially, signs of withdrawal and isolation;
- Regular viewing of internet sites and participation in social media networks that condone radical or extremist views;
- Reference to apocalyptic and conspiracy theories.

As the PRACTICE guide notes, however, it is important to emphasise that such signs cannot in themselves determine whether a student is embarking on a process of political/ideological/religious radicalisation. But as school and as teacher, you can represent the security and confidentiality that gives access to a closer discussion with the student.

CASEBOX – Scenario of student radicalisation

The UK Government Department of Education¹³ provides some useful case studies of students who were prone to different types of radicalisation. One such case was Alice, 16 years old, who was susceptible to the messages of school massacre/right-wing ideology. As soon as the school became aware of her potentially extremist views, they undertook all necessary steps and measures to handle the situation:

What happened: Alice was in year 11 at an independent secondary school. She had written a piece of English coursework in which she expressed extreme right-wing views and glorified the Columbine shooters.

Alice felt the school had ignored the bullying she'd suffered in previous years and decided to take things into her own hands. She had a plan to 'kill the protagonists and take out anyone else who got in her way'. She expressed this through her writing, which was articulate and referenced the Columbine attack.

Support offered: The school spoke to Alice. She reassured them that she was not serious about her threat and was struggling with her mental health.

¹² UNESCO (2016). A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism.

¹³ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-prevent-duty-safeguarding-learners-vulnerable-to-radicalisation/case-studies>

The school discussed this with her parents and asked the local authority Prevent team for informal advice. There were no other concerns about Alice and her mum was very supportive.

The school put in place an action plan to support Alice in her last term and shared this with the college she planned to attend. The college asked Alice's mum how Alice felt about being at college. She said Alice was 'loving college'.

Alice's mum and the college agreed not to speak to Alice about what had happened at school. The college assured her mum that it had a zero-tolerance policy towards bullying. Alice's teachers were asked to look out for any changes in her behaviour and peer groups.

Alice's progress coach made sure that regular one to one meetings were taking place. They also told her about the student led enrichment groups that were available. The college closely monitored Alice's attendance and progression.

Alice joined the college's debating society and creative writing society.

Outcomes: Alice's family said she'd thrived and blossomed at college. Alice said she enjoyed having 'safe' places to discuss topical issues and to listen to different views.

There were no Prevent related concerns raised during Alice's time at college.

Alice has since obtained an apprenticeship.

What is polarisation?

Like radicalisation, the polarisation of society has now become a catchphrase that is omnipresent in political analysis. Whether discussing Trump, Brexit, migration, as well as globalisation, climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, these diverse topics have found within them 'fundamental polarisations of positioning, a positioning which overshadows intermediate shades'¹⁴.

According to the RAN spotlight report¹⁵, polarisation comes in different forms. An important distinction can be made between ideological/political and affective polarisation. Ideological (or issue-based) polarisation refers to the sharpening of opinions, positions or beliefs on a specific issue within a group of like-minded people. The group moves from moderate towards more extreme views on the topic; in other words the gap/distance between groups in opinion widens. Classic examples are differences of opinions between left and right or between progressives and

¹⁴ Beate Küpper, Luca Váradi, and Catherine Lourdes Dy (2021). Polarisation, Radicalisation and discrimination. Focus on Central and Eastern Europe (Introduction, 1). Champions – Action Model to stop Polarisation: <https://www.firstlinepractitioners.com/polarisation-radicalisation-and-discrimination-with-focus-on-central-and-eastern-europe/>

¹⁵ RAN Spotlight – Polarisation (April 2022): https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/ran_spotlight_polarisation_en.pdf

conservatives, but ideological polarisation can also take place with regards to issues such as vaccination against COVID-19 or climate change-related policies.

Affective polarisation, on the other hand, refers to a growing social-emotional distance between groups. Mutual distrust increases and the groups start to show a growing aversion or hostility towards one another. An important and current example of affective polarisation is described as the tendency of US partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party, which has become a defining feature of twenty-first century US politics.¹⁶ Social identities and in- and outgroup dynamics play an important role in affective polarisation. For instance, members of a group that advocates for or against climate action may start sharing broader social identities and world views. The originally ideological polarisation with opposing groups may then grow into us-vs-them thinking, increasing distrust and sometimes even hostility.

The RAN spotlight report further notes that a common misconception in public discourse sees polarisation as equal to conflict. Because they might require different approaches, for policy-makers and practitioners, it is useful to make a distinction between the two – closely-related, but different – phenomena. Polarisation is about increasing distance and alienation, whereas conflict refers to clashes and confrontation.

In fact, polarisation and group identification are not necessarily negative. They are part of an open, pluralistic society and can enrich the democratic debate. The sharpening of opinions and the binding of groups based on shared social identities can be the means to mobilise political ideas and activism. Thus, polarisation can be important in bringing about social change, or the emancipation of minorities.

Why and when should we be concerned about polarisation?

At the same time, there are serious risks associated with polarisation: an impoverishment of the public debate, the escalation of tensions, debates entrenched in the same terminology, without dynamic change, and an “us” versus “them” approach. Affective polarisation can bring about increasing aversion, hate and enmity. This can be toxic and harmful for societal relations and may lead to ruptures and crisis in democracy.

According to the European Commission DG Migration and Home Affairs, polarisation may lead people to approach complex social issues in ‘black and white’ terms, and they contrast and clash sharply with those holding views different from their own. These clashes are different from and should not be confused with regular disagreements where people bring forward and advocate different points of view¹⁷.

¹⁶ See Druckman et al (2021), ‘Affective polarisation, local contexts and public opinion in America’: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-01012-5>

¹⁷ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs. ‘The Media and Polarisation in Europe: Strategies for Local Practitioners to Address Problematic Reporting, May 2023’: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/media-and-polarisation-europe-strategies-local-practitioners-address-problematic-reporting-may-2023_en

As the relevant research of the RAND Corporation indicates, political polarisation that rises to the level of interfering with schooling is not simply a headache; it's a fundamental problem for public education. For, when there is deep disagreement over the essentials—what schools teach, how they keep children safe—schools are at risk of becoming ungovernable¹⁸.

CASEBOX – red-flag:

The RAN short handbook on polarisation¹⁹ uses a (fictitious) example of a secondary school student who expresses polarising views in the classroom in relation to government rules imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic:

'I do not trust the government and I believe they are trying to control us. I have seen many on the internet (for example celebrity/influencer X) who state that the government is not transparent about how deadly the virus is. Also, when looking at the numbers... the effectiveness of the state restrictions does not outweigh the burden for us as young people. I'm still young; I'm totally done with all these restricting rules and will no longer follow up on them. I'll go party with my friends.'

This example was used as part of the RAN's workshops to discuss the pros and cons of different types of reactions that teachers can have. More specifically:

➤ Cool-down:

One option was that a teacher could remove Michael from the classroom. Another option is to avoid the conversation with Michael at that moment but leave him in the classroom. Both options would be depicted as cool-down, because they would likely harm the relationship with Michael and the content would not be discussed. On the other hand, a teacher or youth worker does not always have the knowledge to directly respond to a pupil. By avoiding the discussion, the teacher has more time to think about their response and to search for trustful information, which can help to to deliberately design a lesson about the topic

➤ Counter-narrative

Another approach discussed was that a teacher could start convincing Michael that he is wrong by immediately presenting a counter-narrative. This narrative should be based on rational criteria in order to undermine the arguments of Michael. This confrontational reaction ignores the perspective of Michael and will likely make the relationship worse, for there was strong doubt if Michael would even be open to listening to the teacher. Even more, from the statement of Michael, it remains unclear as to what extent he really believes in a COVID-19 conspiracy theory or if he is worried and critical about the government. Therefore, first, further exploration of Michaels' beliefs might be wise.

The timeliness of the negative impact of polarisation is revealed through the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The RAN has published a short handbook dealing specifically with the way

¹⁸ Schwartz, Heather L. (March 2022), 'What is Really Polarizing Schools Rights Now?', The RAND Blog: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/03/what-is-really-polarizing-schools-right-now.html>

¹⁹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/ran_spotlight_polarisation_en.pdf

in which teachers can discuss polarising narratives related to COVID-19 in the class. Because of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its broad societal impact, youngsters can disagree about possible solutions, which can make discussions controversial. The beliefs that youngsters have about COVID-19 are often influenced by sources on the internet, where both reliable information and misinformation is available. In a polarised environment where young people are under pressure, they can start to believe misinformation, and mistrust can arise about what could be behind the virus. As a result, they might connect events that are not necessarily connected to reality, leading to conspiracy theories²⁰. Subsequently, believing in a conspiracy can be problematic as it may lead to polarisation, radicalisation and eventually undermine public health in relation to COVID-19,²¹ but also more broadly.

The role of conspiracy theories in fostering polarisation should not be underestimated. As the RAN Education Manifesto notes²², conspiracy theories pose an increasing challenge for governments and society: people are showing distrust of authority and related bodies, potentially including schools. These may spread through disinformation and associated echo chambers, whether online or in person at demonstrations. The legitimisation of extreme views leads to the belief for some such groups that their actions (including violence) serve the greater good. An example offered by the RAN Manifesto is the 2021 United States Capitol attack: many rioters misguidedly believed they were saving the country from fraud and corruption, including false claims of election irregularities. It is important that practitioners understand how such theories gain traction and how to reduce people's need to believe in conspiracy theories in the first place.

CASE-BOX – How to identify a conspiracy theory?

1. *The UNESCO guide on 'Addressing Conspiracy Theories – What Teachers Need to know'*²³ identifies seven overall traits that conspiracy theories may possess. According to this interpretation, the more a theory possess these traits, the less plausible it is and more likely to be a conspiracy theory: Contradictory

The underlying belief driving conspiratorial thinking is commitment to the idea that the official account must be wrong. One result is that conspiracy theorists are attracted to multiple ideas that conflict with the official account, even if those ideas are mutually contradictory. One study found that people who believed the conspiracy theory that Princess Diana of Wales (1961-1997) was

²⁰ As the handbook notices, it is important to note that not all criticism on government policy in relation to COVID-19 is conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy thinking refers to the belief that there are secret and hidden organisations that influence our lives without being aware of it

²¹ See also: ISD: COVID-19 disinformation briefing No.2. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformationbriefing-no-2/>

²² RAN Manifesto for Education, Second Edition, 2021.

²³ UNESCO, Education 2030: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000381958&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_b199cd7b-d857-46af-8a92-b4d9e667193d%3F_%3D381958eng.pdf&locale=en&multi=true&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000381958/PDF/381958eng.pdf#%5B%7B%22num%22%3A33%2C%22gen%22%3A0%7D%2C%7B%22name%22%3A%22XYZ%22%7D%2C-118%2C842%2C0%5D

murdered were also more likely to believe that she faked her own death.²⁴ Conspiracy theorists are so committed to disbelieving the official account that it does not matter if their belief system is incoherent.

Case Study: Climate change denial

Climate change denial and conspiratorial thinking go hand in hand. Conspiracy theories are the most common response from climate change deniers when presented with information about climate change.²⁵ The different arguments seen in climate disagreements often contradict each other, such as the simultaneous claims that temperature cannot be measured accurately but global temperatures have declined.²⁶

2. Overriding suspicion

While it is important to have healthy scepticism when assessing claims and information, conspiracy theorists take this to extremes, exhibiting nihilistic levels of scepticism towards institutions, scientific information and official accounts. A telltale red flag of conspiratorial thinking is extreme scepticism of scientific data. This overriding suspicion prevents the belief in anything that does not fit into the conspiracy theory.

3. Nefarious intent

Conspiracy theories often include villainous conspirators, whose motives are assumed to be nefarious. This is part of the reason why conspiracy theories are engaging and attractive to some people, employing compelling narratives of evil villains and assuming agency and intent to explain random events. Conspiracy theories never propose that the presumed conspirators have benign motivations.

4. Something must be wrong

The driving force behind conspiratorial thinking is the rock-solid belief that the official account is based on deception. Consequently, new information or arguments may cause conspiracy theorists to abandon specific parts of their theory when they become untenable, but the underlying conviction that “something must be wrong” does not change.

5. Persecuted victim

²⁴ Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3, 767–773. doi:10.1177/1948550611434786

²⁵ Smith, N., & Leiserowitz, A. (2012). The rise of global warming skepticism: exploring affective image associations in the United States over time. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal*, 32(6), 1021–1032.

²⁶ Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., & Lloyd, E. (2016). The “Alice in Wonderland” mechanics of the rejection of (climate) science: Simulating coherence by conspiracism. *Synthese*, 195, 175–196. doi:10.1007/s11229-016-1198-6, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11229-016-1198-6>

Other common characters in conspiracy theories are heroic victims - the theorists themselves. Conspiracy theorists see themselves as victims of organized persecution. Simultaneously, they also believe they are brave heroes fighting against the odds to bring down the all-powerful conspirators.

6. *Immune to evidence*

The overriding suspicion of conspiracy theorists makes it extremely difficult to change their mind and convince them that their theory is wrong. This is because any evidence you present that shows a theory is false is re-interpreted as being part of the conspiracy.²⁶ This can manifest in several ways. If there is no evidence to support a conspiracy theory, that only proves how effective the conspirators were in hiding their activities. Conversely, if there is strong evidence against the conspiracy theory, the conspiracy theory is subsequently expanded to include the source of the evidence as being part of the theory.

7. *Re-interpreting randomness*

Pattern detection is a common feature in conspiracy theories, where random, unrelated events are weaved into a broader, interconnected pattern where nothing occurs by accident.²⁷ Any perceived connections are imbued with sinister meaning. For example, a random fact such as intact windows in the Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks was re-interpreted as evidence for a conspiracy because if an airliner had hit the Pentagon, then supposedly all the windows would have shattered.²⁸

What is social inclusion?

Educational Psychology has indicated that the social inclusion of children and adolescents into peer groups is an important predictor of their academic, social, and psychological development. Social inclusion covers all aspects of peer relationships and peer group dynamics, such as inclusive and exclusive behaviours, peer acceptance and popularity, friendships, and intergroup relationships. It may also refer to classroom-level constructs, such as classroom norms and social hierarchies²⁹.

According to UNESCO, the right to education aims to ensure everyone achieves their human right to access quality education throughout life. Particular attention is directed towards learners who may face the risk of marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement. An inclusive approach to education entails the consideration of each individual's specific needs, ensuring the full engagement and collective achievement of all learners. This approach recognizes the inherent potential of every

²⁷ Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

²⁸ Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 24(6), 749-761

²⁹ The Role of Teachers in Students' Social Inclusion in the Classroom. *Educational Psychology*: <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/11536/the-role-of-teachers-in-students-social-inclusion-in-the-classroom#:~:text=Social%20inclusion%20covers%20all%20aspects,classroom%20norms%20and%20social%20hierarchies>.

child to acquire knowledge and appreciates their distinct characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning requirements. For example, where a child has a disability, he or she would not be separated from other learners in school and learning assessments and progress would take the disability into account³⁰.

CASE-BOX – Social inclusion resources³¹:

The University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching faculty³² catalogues resources that are appropriate for a variety of classroom settings to promote inclusive teaching. Each activity includes the overview, goals, and instructions for implementing the activity successfully and includes advice on how to best utilize it.

As the resources suggest, many of these exercises are simple to carry out but can have a powerful impact on the classroom experience. As such, instructors should employ these activities with attention to core learning objectives and care to ensure the ethical use of student experiences. Given that students come from various backgrounds and experiences, instructors should examine their own assumptions in advance, give students a lot of choice about what they may write and share with others in the class, and be highly transparent about how student responses will be used.

The suggested activities include the following:

- **Quick-Prep Activities** – These activities may be incorporated into existing courses or lessons with relatively little preparation.
- **Icebreakers** – These icebreaker activities are inclusive in that they allow students to bring themselves and their identities into the classroom, setting the tone for mutual learning, connection, and respect
- **Group Development** – These activities help students to examine group relationships and learn about each other beyond appearances on their own terms.
- **Self-Reflection** – These activities prompt students to consider their relationships to social identity, structural oppression, and intergroup dialogue.

³⁰ UNESCO, What you need to know about inclusion in education: <https://www.unesco.org/en/inclusion-education/need-know>

³¹ See also Mujis et al, 'Every Child Matters. Leading Schools to Promote Social Inclusion: a Study of Practice'. Centre for Equity in Education, The University of Manchester: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/7060/7/download_id=17162&filename=ecm-leading-under-pressure-literature-review_Redacted.pdf

³² <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/activity-main-page/>

How should teachers act?

Reporting cases of student radicalisation and home-school cooperation

According to the RAN Education Manifesto, it is crucial that a school plan to tackle these issues be implemented *before* polarisation/radicalisation/extremism actually becomes a problem. In addition to reaching out to school deans, the school psychologist and/or counsellor, a crucial step is to establish home-school cooperation.

Families and parents also have a crucial role to play in what happens in the classroom. Drawing on PARTICIPATION research outputs, the following recommendations for teachers may help ensure home-school cooperation in cases of concern:

- Inform parents on their children's progress at school on a regular basis.
- Try to understand the parents' expectations concerning the school.
- Build a partnership between parents and the school environment by creating a friendly and peaceful atmosphere.
- Reject prejudices. Be ready to proactively communicate with every parent and to receive and calmly analyse possible criticism.
- Do not think that you are always right and know everything. Listen to parents, let them talk, and show understanding when you clarify your positions.
- Think about the form and content of the conversation with parents before it takes place.
- If you have to give the parents bad news, start by finding the student's positive qualities.
- Do not leave a parent with a problem to solve – rather, offer help, show ways to cope, or direct them to the right person

Best practices in the classroom

The school as a 'safe space' for dialogue and positive interaction – Developing a sense of empathy with and amongst students

According to the PARTICIPATION findings (5.1³³), schools must provide a space in which youths are actively supported and encouraged to address difficult, challenging and even confrontational issues. Students are exposed to these issues on a daily basis, but many lack opportunity and space to dialogue and discuss, formulate their views and exchange opinions with others. Importantly: this will often require special training and support for teachers. As the report further emphasises, creating a safe space for dialogue requires specific facilitation skills, knowing how to create spaces for sharing experiences, reflection, and for young people to be able to express and define their own needs and points of view, as well as how not to impose views upon students. The adoption of a whole school approach, developing a community space for all the involved parties, including

³³ Brand-Jacobsen & Pistarini, Laura (2022). Comprehensive Review. Participation Deliverable 5.1.

students, parents, teachers and people residing around the school (Participation³⁴), was mentioned as a good practice.

Seeking to support educators in this task, PARTICIPATION deliverables have offered a number of steps that the adoption of a whole-school approach may include:

- Discuss contentious topics that preoccupy students, that spark debate in the classroom or that need extra time in the classroom.
- Discuss any issues you are facing in the classroom during school assemblies to share views, receive support, and establish a coordinated approach;
- Develop anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct through participatory processes involving students, teachers, school personnel, and families;
- Emphasise specific values/principles/beliefs across the whole school;
- And enhance teacher-to-teacher communication both in terms of coordination and mutual support.

Open classroom climate: How to address controversial/contentious and/or sensitive issues in the classroom

Controversial issues have been defined by some scholars as 'those issues on which our society is clearly divided and significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions based on alternative values'³⁵.

Case-box – Contentious Topics:

Why teach them?

Teachers need to be clear on the reasons why discussing such topics is a worthwhile endeavour as contentious topics:

- *are unavoidable;*
- *provide students opportunities to explore their own values;*
- *provide students opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and respectful communication.*

Tips on how to talk about them:

- *set ground rules for the discussion before problems arise: allow only one student to speak at any given time without interruption and ask the other students to listen, clearly ban any racist or*

³⁴ Shangoyan, Markar et al (2023). Community-based Strategies and Practices for Preventing and Countering Radicalisation and Polarisation. PARTICIPATION Deliverable 3.3.

³⁵ Robert Stradling, Michael Noctor, Bridget Baines, Teaching Controversial Issues (London, UK, Edward Arnold, 1984).

discriminatory and derogatory language, allow all those interested in expressing an opinion to speak, divide the class into groups

- *the teacher's opinion should only be expressed after class discussion of the issue.*
- *Utilise different methods: debate, drama, role-play, and simulation*

The UNESCO Teacher's Guide explains how crucial the role of teachers is in addressing such 'taboo' topics. With the growing access to information and communication technology, teachers and parents may be surprised by the extent to which children are already exposed to crucial issues and are aware of controversial world events, have been exposed to views that can turn to radicalisation or polarisation. Teachers should, therefore, not refrain from tackling such issues. If they do, the students will venture out to seek answers by themselves, which can lead them to misguided sources of information and approaches. UNESCO thus argues that avoidance is not an option.

According to the PARTICIPATION report on Building Resilience and Prevention in Schools³⁶, addressing sensitive or controversial issues and topics in the classroom is generally valued as a positive way to prepare future citizens for participating in the handling of societal controversies, helping youth to actively participate in political and civic activities as adults, developing a citizenry and electorate that is educated and enlightened, and raising awareness among young people of how fake narratives are oftentimes constructed to sway public opinions.

As the UNESCO Teacher's Guide emphasises, however, there are some important prerequisites to discussing controversial local issues, particularly considering the possibility of a lack of knowledge or misinformation about international events:

- ▶ Connecting the issue of violent extremism to content in the local curriculum, in different subjects: languages and literature, history, sciences, etc;
- ▶ Understanding the social, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of the local context;
- ▶ Including minority-group perspectives in the discussions – or at least ensuring that their views are represented, so young people are offered a balanced view of issues;
- ▶ Being very clear to learners about your own role as the moderator (objective voice, 'devil's advocate', impartial facilitator, etc.);
- ▶ Identifying the right timing, since controversial issues should not be discussed haphazardly.

Considering that in certain cases, discussing local manifestations of extremism or radicalisation can be too complex and sensitive. The UNESCO guide offers a best practice and suggests the introduction of the subject to be discussed through an example which – depending on the context – is far removed from the challenges faced by the students. As such, the Guide mentions that in 2015, UNESCO and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum developed a training programme entitled Conference for International Holocaust Education to assist education stakeholders from all parts of the world in developing new pedagogies using education about the Holocaust as a prism to tackle their own traumatic past of genocide and crimes against humanity.

³⁶ PARTICIPATION, Building Resilience and Prevention in Schools (D3.4), edited by Francesco Farinelli.

This approach has proven particularly effective for communities that have suffered mass atrocities. It has also served as a productive approach to discuss how topics of polarisation and radicalisation may lead to violent extremism and terrorism.

Case-box – Activities for contentious topics:

1. Mysteries

Create mysteries to solve in the classroom. For instance, bring in a bag of random items. Together, with the rest of the class, come up with a story that includes every item in that bag. From there, formulate a mystery that asks, “Who, what, when, where, and why?”. You can arrange this activity to respond to the controversial topic you choose for the class or that the class chooses to discuss.

2. Diamond ranking

This works with images that respond to the topic matter. The idea is that the group divides into smaller groups of 3. In 3, they choose pictures that best represent their ideas about the topic matter (from the internet, picture databases etc). The group then proceeds to arrange them in a diamond shape, with the most preferred on the top, the least on the bottom. This gives them a mapping of the subject, with degrees of interest and involvement.

3. Values continuum

The teacher explains to participants that they will read a series of statements and ask them to move to the appropriate side of the room based on how they feel about the statement. This statement needs to be inside the theme of the discussion - the contentious topic of choice Example: “I prefer to know everyone in my neighbourhood. If you resonate with this statement, please move to the left side of the room: I enjoy meeting new people everyday. If you resonate more with this statement, please move to the right side of the room. You may also find yourself somewhere in between.” The groups formed are asked to discuss their opinions and overall commonalities. Then, they brief the classroom.

Global Citizenship Education and Critical thinking as educational ideals

For UNESCO, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is the emerging approach to education that focuses on nurturing a sense of belonging to a common humanity, as well as genuine respect for all – no matter the differences. In other words, GCED is about instilling respect for human rights, social justice, gender equality and environmental sustainability, which are fundamental values that help raise the defences of peace against violent extremism.³⁷

Alongside GCED, in recent years critical thinking has gained ground as a key word in the debate on teaching democracy and democratic learning processes among students. Drawing on the PRACTICE

³⁷ Global Citizenship Education – Topics and Learning Objectives, UNESCO, 2015, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002329/232993e.pdf> and Global Citizenship Education - Preparing learners for the challenges of the twenty-first century, UNESCO, 2014, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002277/227729e.pdf>

guide³⁸, critical thinking is increasingly mentioned as a kind of mantra for the ability to be critical-analytical and reflective towards attitudes and expressions of views and opinions in both public forums, private contexts and social media. In this sense, the common classroom constitutes exactly such a sphere for attitude exchange and attitude processing (PRACTICE).

The PARTICIPATION guide (3.4) offers specific recommendations to teachers to enhance critical thinking skills:

- Introduce the students to a range of perspectives, even if they are dissimilar to their own, while approaching these topics in a spirit of critical inquiry;
 - Increase a continuous space for discussion among students within the classroom, helping them to recognise the complexity of decisions and opinions;
 - Improve the students' communication skills to enhance their critical thinking against conspiracy theories and fake news;
 - Encourage your pupils to develop stronger arguments and more convincing evidence when defending their own positions;
 - When it comes to discussing contentious topics by using critical thinking skills or fact and logic-based interventions, pay attention to the role of emotions in shaping students' beliefs;
 - Tap into guides and any other useful material containing suggestions for activities, games, and initiatives devoted to facilitating the exchange of information and different points of view between youth on polarising, contentious issues.
- Encourage self-reflection, self-assessment of one's views through games, activities, research.

Digital awareness in schools: how to assess information online; fact-checking; the risks of gaming and metaverse

School students typically spend a great deal of time online, on social media or playing games. These are also places where recruitment is increasingly prevalent. Remote learning, the pandemic and lockdowns all contributed to making online spaces the most common place for socialising³⁹. Without critical thinking and digital awareness skills, students must navigate all kinds of online material alone.

According to the Conclusion Paper of the RAN small-scale expert session on 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation'⁴⁰, the online dimension of hotbeds of radicalisation is twofold. One dimension is based on the online activities of physical extremist groups, promoting their narratives and ideology and aiming at recruiting members and supporters. Here, social media and video sharing platforms have played, and sometimes still play, a key role in serving as areas of operation for these groups. The second dimension is that of an (almost) exclusively online hotbed of radicalisation, where individuals co-create a space for fellow extremists who do not necessarily want to connect physically

³⁸ PRACTICE Teachers Handbook – Guidelines for Prevention Work (2021).

³⁹ RAN Manifesto for Education, Second Edition, 2021.

⁴⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-small-scale-meeting-role-hotbeds-radicalisation-online-meeting-25-november-2020_en

with each other or an extremist group but feel connected as an “unorganised collective” that shares specific extremist and anti-democratic narratives

Both online and offline, factors that may have a bearing on someone becoming vulnerable to radicalisation may include: peer pressure, influence from other people or via the internet, bullying, crime against them or their involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour, family tensions, race/hate crime, lack of self-esteem or identity and personal or political grievances⁴¹.

As the RAN Education Manifesto explains, the key concern about gaming centres, in particular, concern the socialising aspects of gaming-adjacent spaces. A number of platforms, such as Twitch, 4chan, tiktok or even more mainstream platforms such as Instagram, allow right-wing and Islamist extremists to recruit openly.⁴² Unlike other online forums, they do little to hide their identity in many gaming (-adjacent) spaces. This is an area needing urgent attention both in terms of research and of practical strategies for education. Right-wing extremist activity is an area of particular concern. However, as the Manifesto notes, this should be approached cautiously, since there is no evidence to suggest that gamers are more susceptible to radicalisation. The fact remains that we do know that extremists are present in this space, and they are spreading hate on numerous platforms⁴³.

Drawing on a British investigation, the PRACTICE guide argues that filtering on the Internet is seen as a classic methodology to prevent online radicalisation, where youngsters are cut off from activities on certain parts of social media, chat forums and video sites. Through the implementation of a digital literacy strategy, youngsters are subsequently meant to be protected through a learning process that strengthens their competences to access online information and material from a critical perspective⁴⁴.

Accordingly, teachers can initiate dialogue where students are encouraged to discuss and reflect on their own knowledge, use and perception of various online media and forums. Specifically, the PRACTICE guide provides some keywords as examples for the dialogue⁴⁵:

⁴¹ Association of School and College Leaders (2018). A Guide to Safeguarding: Radicalisation and Extremism.

⁴² See for instance: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/05-gaming-report-twitch.pdf>; https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/EUIF%20Technical%20Meeting%20on%20Video%20Gaming%20October%202021%20RAN%20Policy%20Support%20paper_en.pdf ; https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/221005_research_launch_on_gaming_ve.pdf

⁴³ For further information on this topic, readers can refer to papers [on gaming-adjacent platforms](#) and [gamification](#).

⁴⁴ Cf McNicol, Sarah (2016): ‘Responding to Concerns about Online Radicalisation in U.K. Schools through a Radicalisation Critical Digital Literacy Approach’.

⁴⁵ Drawing on The Danish Intelligence Service, the Media Council for Children and Youth and the Danish National Centre for Pre-vention of Extremism: (2018): ‘Nettets Vildveje. Om løgn, manipulation og propaganda online’, English title: ‘Wild roads of the Internet. About lies, manipulation and propaganda online’.

- What do you know about search services and social media data collection? How do they get their knowledge?
- What social media do you use on a daily basis - and why did you choose these media?
- Do you know other search services than Google, for instance, Qwant.com, findx.com, duckduckgo.com, startpage.com? Try to search on certain issues on the various services – do you see any differences in the information, you gain?
- What do you know about phenomena as echo chambers, encrypted services, the dark Internet, fake news, trolls? How do you perceive such phenomena, and what would be a critical approach?
- What does it mean for a democracy that we cannot always trust information we get online?

Case-box – Gaming activities for understanding extremism

Utilise games available online to make students approach contentious issues. These are usually serious games, an umbrella term for any game-based initiative that has a 'serious' agenda. The ultimate goal is not 'fun', or 'entertainment'. The goal is education, or providing an opportunity to practice or refine a new skill.

One version of the activity can be asking them to divide into small groups, use tablets/laptops/phones to explore one game that helps process some of the contentious issues of choice.

Some examples are:

- [INFORMATION TOWER](#) (available in Italian), helping recognise real news from fake news? The player is given a series of clues to declare if a news is true or false. Examples of clues are:
 - the formatting of the text;
 - the sources cited;
 - the credibility of the site.
- [Pox Save the People](#) - card games about serious issues: the impact of the anti-vaccination movements and avoiding social stereotypes.
- [People Power Game](#) – a video game based on the series in collaboration with one of the leaders of Serbia's Otpor! Movement. PBS designed the game to teach nonviolent methods for waging conflict using player-built scenarios.
- [PeaceMaker](#) – a video game to promote peace.' It focuses on the Israeli-Palestine conflict. In this government simulator, players need to represent one of the sides and make social, political and military decisions. The positive and negative consequences of these decisions teach the players about a vastly complex situation.
- [CoronaQuest](#) (2020) - CoronaQuest is an online card game. Students battle against coronavirus itself using protective actions and the support of people around them. The game reminds them about actions they can take to stay safe in real life as well as public health and social measures.
- [DECOUNT](#): is a game that rolls out four radicalisation stories; the main characters, two male and two female, navigate these jihadi and right-wing extremist stories towards several possible endings which depend on their decisions. The game immerses the player into a gradually evolving

extremist environment on social media and in real life; it also presents opportunities to exit extremism through interactions with significant others such as friends and family.

- **REAaction S. G.:** Developed by VITECO for the University of Eastern Piedmont (UEP), REAaction S. G. dives you into a single player simulation experience. In a few clicks, you will become a nurse or social worker. You will have to preserve the health of patients and save their lives. Browse the map, ask the right questions, fill out the paperwork, choose and use the most appropriate care tools, make the call and perform the final debriefing. REAaction S. G. is simple, intuitive and downloadable. Designed for online learning, REAaction S. G. simulates the professional skills of nurses and social workers, focusing on the health needs of the individual and the community.

- Key features:

- 5 ultra realistic scenarios;
- 2 convincing playable characters;
- first person view with WASD movement for a more immersive experience;
- customised settings.

The role of sports in countering radicalisation and extremism

Just as there is no one-single pathway or factor that drives someone to extremism, there is no single institution, field or sector that can, on its own, effectively address the breadth of programming, needs and engagement required to promote youth wellbeing and resilience and prevent radicalization and violent extremism. The most efficient approach involves a 'whole-of-society', from educational institutions and government – local and national, including youth organisations, artistic and cultural sectors, religious authorities and communities, influencers, but also sports organisations, including clubs and athletes⁴⁶.

Empowering coaches and trainers in sports to prevent youth Radicalisation and Violent Extremism is a pedagogical approach that has been implemented in various countries, such as France, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, and Germany. As noticed by a teacher interviewed in the framework of PARTICIPATION (5.1):

[Teachers can] use sports to inculcate positive values. Kids have a lot of energy and if you make them sit in a classroom, they're just going to be frustrated, but if you channel that into a playground or channel that into an activity to teach them about civic culture or cultural diversity. [They can do] play based low-cost activities they can do. Use recycled materials, stuff they can bring from home.

Similarly, another teacher shares their experience about the value of education through sports:

Street football is a project in Berghof they did in Jordan and they used sports to reduce polarisation among children. They didn't use classical rules of football but adapted them to

⁴⁶ See also Dr. Dežman., (2021). Martial arts as a sport and a way to prevent political radicalization and youth violence. Safe Zone. <https://www.safezoneproject.eu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ZlatanDezman-ok.pdf> and UNODC, (2020). Desk Review on Sport as a Tool for the Prevention of Violent Extremism. https://www.unodc.org/documents/dohadeclaration/Sports/PVE/PVE_DeskReview_Final.pdf

include peace education, nonviolent education into the rules of the game. Take something youth are familiar with and adapt it in a creative way. Do One Brave Thing – using Instagram lives. Don't come up with something outside their reality -it won't reach them. Understand their reality and introduce yourself in that reality to engage with them.

Based on the above, we provide here a (non-exhaustive) list of principles that may help foster social inclusion and mend broken relations in the school context:

- Participants need to understand the value of teamwork: in practice, this means that coaches/facilitators increase the number of team activities gradually- they start from individual to teamwork
- Always have diverse participants
- Co-creation: participants need to be involved in the general outline of the game and the overall rules
- coaches/facilitators slowly encourage trust/relying on others
- Participants are encouraged to develop peer mentoring skills
- Incorporate activities that strengthen skills for overcoming peer pressure and inequality and help to address perceptions of unfairness (for instance, short group discussions before competitions inside the team).

Case-box – Sports Activities:

Teachers and educators may start a cycle of sport activities: start gradually, from individual challenges to team activities; ideally it can be a sports club, focused on several sports that grow into a team activity: i.e. volleyball.

The Technical Guide 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport'⁴⁷ offers the following recommendations in the planning of sports activities:

- Ensure the participation of diverse participants, from the community and outside
- Start with individual preparatory sessions, or small groups activities (technique, coordination etc).
- After a couple of weeks, ask participants to design a project mascot/logo.
- Ask them to design posters with the team rules.
- Facilitate games that require communication and encourage active listening, such as:

⁴⁷ 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport'; Technical Guide, Un Drug Agency, Vienna, 2020.

- Games that require instruction or direction
- Games that require participants to work in pairs (suggestion: one teammate is blindfolded, and a partner must give instructions to direct that teammate to a particular area to score a point)
- Facilitate games that rely on teamwork, such as:
 - All participants must assume a role within the team.
 - A point cannot be scored until every player touches the ball. All participants must assume a role within the team.
- Allow participants time between activities to reflect on and discuss the lesson in the game.
- Plan activities that deliver messages of fair play, respect for each other and for rules, equality and celebrating differences.
- Reinforce positive messages through sport and acknowledge the challenging situations of everyday life outside of sport and the skills that participants are learning to support themselves and each other.

Challenges

Risk of education fostering radicalisation and extremism

Educators and trainers may directly increase children and youth's vulnerability to being radicalised, or further them along paths towards extremism and polarisation.

According to the PARTICIPATION 5.1 Report, this can be done through exposing youth to the teacher/educator's own prejudices; failing to handle difficult or challenging conversations and 'moments' in a classroom/programme which may trigger or fuel frustration, polarisation or prejudices amongst some students/youth; re-enforcing polarisation/blaming/stigmatisation of certain groups; or making students/youth feel alienated, unheard or targeted by prejudice.

By raising topics and not properly following through on them, opening contentious issues but not giving enough space for them to be addressed, or exposing children and youth to messages or even 'formers' in ways that may make ideas or acts of extremism seem attractive or exciting, education can also spark or further interest towards extremism. As the Report further explains, if teachers/trainers themselves are poorly prepared; unable to handle difficult conversations well; directly or indirectly, overtly or subtly manifest certain prejudices or biases; or frustrate children and youth's efforts to engage, this can also increase frustration and polarisation.

A further risk that emerged out of PARTICIPATION's findings is the ways in which counter-extremism and counter-radicalisation education and training programmes *themselves* can re-enforce, create or



further stigmatisation of certain communities or groups and foster or deepen prejudices and discrimination.

As the Report 5.1 discusses, this can happen through a variety of ways including: how topics are handled; if there is excessive or exclusive focus on particular communities, ideological or faith groups; identities of trainers/educators; images and pictures in books, slides, training materials, videos; language; handling of student discussions and interactions; and more. All schools, educators, trainers and organisations working in education should be very clearly aware of this risk. Programme content, approaches and methodology should be thoroughly assessed to make sure they do not themselves re-enforce or promote stigmatisation, stereotypes or prejudices, including but not limited to identity, religion, culture, and gender.

The limits of critical thinking

Conventional wisdom sometimes assumes that youth are radicalized because they 'lack sufficient education' or 'critical thinking' or are 'taken advantage of' and 'swept up by persuasive narratives' and propaganda. This is, at best, only part of the story. As the Youth-led guide on preventing violent extremism through education recognizes, extremist movements and regimes are often born from significant intellects.⁴⁸ Youth often join not because they lack critical thinking, but precisely because they have it. While it is increasingly recognised that 'more young people today are being radicalized through soft power – extremist ideas, ideology, narratives and propaganda', and that 'hard power' responses may be insufficient to address these; the narratives, ideology and propaganda youth respond to are often addressing actual grievances and injustice.

The PRACTICE Guide offers some good practice examples and tips for critical thinking activities in school.

One such activity is titled 'FROM WHERE DO I GET MY NEWS?'. It aims to make the students reflect critically on their own use of media, thus to strengthen their critical analysis by reflecting on news from various news angles:

1. As a prelude to the exercise, the teacher collects a number of headlines from newspapers, media and magazines that differ from each other in the use of words and tone. For example, select 10 different headings and copy them on one page for each student.
2. The students gather in small groups of 3-4 members.
3. All students individually tick the headings which they would give the highest priority when reading, based on the method: the most important headline gets 5 points, the second most important gets 4 points, the third most important gets 3 points etc. This leaves some headlines with no points at all.

⁴⁸ Ghosh R., Manuel A., Alice Chan W.Y., Dilimulati M., Babaei M., (2016). Education and Security: A global literature review on the role of education in countering violent religious extremism, Institute for Global Change: https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_Education%20and%20Security.pdf, qtd in D5.1, p. 14.

4. In the groups, the students exchange their priorities and each student must argue and justify their priorities, thus explaining the motives behind the choices.
5. The students are gathering in plenary, and the teacher asks the groups to tell what characterizes the headings which were given the highest priorities: were they critical headings? Were those sensational headings? Did mysterious headings call for more reading?

Another activity proposed in the PRACTICE guide is called 'COMMUNITY ACROSS DISAGREEMENTS'. This specifically illustrates how teachers can strengthen the students' ability and self-confidence to dare external disagreement and say no to attitudes they do not approve. This is especially true of intolerant or outright discriminatory attitudes which the school officially distances itself from, such as prejudiced attitudes toward homosexuality. The goal is through didactic training in 'DISAGREEMENT COMMUNITIES' to experience that solid youth communities in school or otherwise can accommodate disagreement on many issues if the community at the same time is able to reflect critically on and also reject discriminatory views that violate the community's democratic and equal framework:

- 1 The teacher and the students in the class jointly list a number of concepts and keywords on the board. These must be keywords that may give rise to discussion and disagreement.
- 2 The students are divided into two groups (or more, depending on the number of students in the class).
- 3 Each group is instructed to have a particular attitude towards the first concept or keyword, for example, LGBTQ persons. The attitudes of the groups must be opposite.
- 4 The groups are separated and work to find knowledge and point of view from media, articles etc, about their keyword. Each group builds arguments for the position they are set to defend and put forward against the other groups' arguments.
- 5 The groups now meet for a "theatre contest", where they must try to refute the other groups' positions and persuade each other to change position.
- 6 After some time with the "theatre contest", the students continue to discuss and critically reflect on the attitudes they had in the play and their own reflections on the subject.

Remaining neutral and respecting a diversity of opinions

Is a discussion always constructive? Classroom discussions can have drawbacks. Because controversial topics are strongly related with identity, students might want to defend their positions and are less likely to participate reflectively (i.e., openly listen to different perspectives and reflect on their own). Moreover, focusing on the extremes can be counterproductive as it might seem that there are only extreme positions possible. Therefore, a teacher has to think carefully about how to discuss the topic⁴⁹.

The RAN Victims of Terrorism Teachers' Guide provides a list of steps and measures teachers should take in helping them address and respect the diversity of opinions in the classroom.

⁴⁹ RAN Short Handbook – COVID-19 Narrative that Polarise: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-12/ran_paper_covid-19_stories_that_polarise_20201112_en.pdf

Dos and don'ts:

- Emphasise why it is key to learn from each other's perspectives;
- Explain the importance of different opinions and how they can coexist;
- Have a conversation at the level of the students;
- If students have controversial opinions, instead of judging them, make them the 'experts' and ask them to substantiate their opinions with research;
- Take time to reflect on the discussion and to make a distinction between facts, opinions and emotions;
- Correct factual inaccuracies when they play an important role in the discussion • Give room for all sorts of opinions in order to foster an inclusive environment;
- Downplay stereotypes and monocausal explanations (e.g. the perceived association between Islam and terrorism);
- Do not use graphic images or graphic content;
- Give students the option to create their own action framework.

Handling conflicts and managing polarising comments and situations

The key to making sure that conflicts are appropriately handled in the classroom is to make the students feel and experience the debate as a democratic and open process that treats them all as equals. This, as the UNESCO Teacher's Guide highlights, is equally as meaningful as the actual content of the discussion.

As UNESCO further explains, it is very important that the process of discussing violent extremism is completed within a structured cycle. There has to be a preparation stage for both the teachers and the students. Ground rules must be laid at the very beginning and the teacher must draw clearly the boundaries of what is permitted and what is not. The students should not be left feeling that their voices were not heard or that in-depth discussion was avoided or terminated abruptly. Debriefing and concluding discussions are thus as relevant as the preparation. If all students are aware that their views were heard and respected, they will be less likely to band together and mobilise afterwards. During the discussion, it may also be an opportune time to remind the students that bullying or violence in schools will not be tolerated under any circumstances. If necessary, the teacher can identify unsettled issues requiring in-depth examination and/or follow-up activities and continue the conversation at another time.⁵⁰

Teachers, Schools & Trainers Become Targets of Hate

Another very real risk is that teachers, schools and organisations can themselves become targets of hate, trolling and even violent or deadly attacks. The space of teaching and education in many parts of Europe has become more contentious, polarised and violent, placing teachers, schools, organisations and trainers at greater risk.

⁵⁰ Stopping Violence in Schools: A guide for teachers, UNESCO 2009, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001841/184162e.pdf>

According to the **PARTICIPATION Deliverable 5.1**, if teachers/trainers' efforts are misperceived or not understood correctly; if parents/community members are opposed to messages/content they are promoting or feel teachers/organisations have attacked, stigmatised or insulted their community; teacher, trainers, organisations and schools may themselves be targeted. Additionally, in several European countries today, educators and organisations may be targeted by government and extremist parties if they are seen as promoting women's rights, working to address gender-based violence, promoting rights of refugees and migrant communities, LGBTQI+ rights, or seen as 'proselytizing' or promoting certain ideologies, religions or political agendas. The space of teaching and education in many parts of Europe has become more contentious, polarised and violent, placing teachers, schools, organisations and trainers at greater risk.

Conflictual relationships with students' parents

Conflictual relationships with their pupils' parents may constitute an important challenge for teachers. The 'guidebook for schools and parents' written by teachers in the framework of the 'Comenius Regio Project' is the result of inter-institutional and worldwide talks and initiatives about how to foster close collaboration between parents and class teachers/tutors. The report in question summarises a number of challenges and issues affecting the relationship between teachers and parents.

The PARTICIPATION D3.4 report provides a list of the most relevant aspects in a potentially confrontational relationship, including teachers' lack of time or a sense of lack of real influence on the behaviour of parents towards their children but also burnout, aversion to communicating with the so-called 'difficult parents' because of the emotional costs of this type of relationships. Similarly, parents may fear that a conversation with the teacher may have a negative impact on the treatment of their child, they may be afraid of hearing 'bad news' about the child, thereby also of lowering their value as parents. Indeed, more than simply a matter of the school and of teacher training, the prevention of radicalisation and polarisation is also a matter of parents' education. As noticed in the PARTICIPATION 5.1 report, 'because students learning is not happening in the school only. Mostly they learn from their home with their family, with their parents. There should be a project or a programme that is targeting parents so that the learning in the school and in the home are connected'.

Conclusions

The objective of this guide has been to support school teachers and education professionals tackle radicalisation, polarisation and social inclusion in schools. Drawing on the findings of the PARTICIPATION project, including on a selection of pertinent pieces of research, surveys and guides on each of the three topics, this guide has sought to provide both a sufficient theoretical background and some necessary, practical recommendations (including activities, and scenarios) on the ways in which teachers and education professionals can spot and address such timely challenges in the school environment.

Alongside the selection of material that the authors have chosen to help create the content of this guide, a significant number of additional sources on addressing radicalisation, polarisation and social inclusion is, we believe, equally helpful for the school context. For this reason, we provide below a selection of these sources, to which we hope education professionals may also turn for any further support:

- [*Educate Against Hate*](#): website developed by the UK Department for Education and the Home Office
- Association of School and College Leaders, '[A Guide to Safeguarding: Radicalisation and Extremism](#)' (written by Anna Cole).
- Radicalisation Awareness Network media on countering radicalisation (videos, podcasts and other): https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/ran-media_en
- [*Teaching Controversial Issues: A guide for teachers - Oxfam Policy & Practice*](#)
- United Nations Development Program, '[Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism \(PCVE\) in Malaysia – Handbook for Civil Society Organisations \(CSOs\)](#)'.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: Video and Teacher's Guide on 'Terrorism and Violent Extremism to Improve Secondary School Students': <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/secondary/teaching-guide-terrorism-violent-extremism/index.html>



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