INEE

Thematic Paper

SUMMARY

There remains limited consensus on how to define violent extremism. This paper highlights some of the more commonly used concepts and working definitions, though INEE does not take a particular stance.

The paper presents current thinking and up-to-date research, and provides some examples of how education can contribute towards preventing violence.

Preventing Violent Extremism

An introduction to education and preventing violent extremism

ABOUT INEE

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is an open, global network that promotes access to quality, safe, and relevant education for all persons affected by crisis.

www.ineesite.org

Conceptualized and developed by the INEE Education Policy Working Group Subgroup on Youth, Violence and Peacebuilding

What is violent extremism?

Violent extremism refers to the use of violence in line with an ideological commitment to achieve political, religious, or social goals (Atran, 2015). These violent acts can be carried out by any individual or group from a range of beliefs and ideologies.

Whether globally, nationally or locally, through politically motivated acts of violence, communal violence, or through terrorism, violent extremism can impact society in a myriad of ways. Violent extremism unravels peaceful communities, often intentionally targeting ordinary citizens. This can lead governments to respond with hard security measures which are often aimed at specific groups that are suspected of causing the attacks. By altering local and global discourse around security responses, it makes hard security measures more widely accepted. This can have broader repercussions on the cycle of continued violence.

The average rise in violent extremism over the past five decades (Our World in Data, 2016) is affecting immigration law and policy in many countries worldwide, fostering increased intolerance and prejudice against certain groups, and eroding social cohesion, even in otherwise stable societies. These increased security measures against specific groups can further exacerbate intolerance and incite violent responses. Common misconceptions about where terrorist attacks take place most frequently also fuels further misunderstanding. While terrorist attacks take place all over the world, they are heavily concentrated geographically in a handful of countries. For example, although terrorist attacks took place in 104 countries in 2016, 55% of all attacks took place in five countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines), and 75% of all deaths due to terrorist attacks took place in five countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, and Pakistan) (US Department of State, 2017). It is important to review the literature and information available, as well as to understand key concepts, before making assumptions about where such attacks occur most frequently, and how to prevent such attacks from taking place.

Radicalization

Radicalization is the action or process by which an individual's opinions and behavior become significantly different from most of the people around them (Davies, 2008). Radical opinions or positions are often associated with advocating for partial or complete political or social change (Oxford English Living Dictionaries, 2017). Holding radical opinions or beliefs is not necessarily harmful. However, if a person or group uses violence to justify or achieve the changes they desire, this is often called 'violent extremism' (Christmann, 2012).

There is limited consensus or common understanding of what causes radicalization and at what point it becomes problematic. Sometimes radical opinions are considered harmful only when they infringe on others' freedoms, whether through verbal or physical violence. Other times incitation to violence, or even purely holding extreme views, is regarded as harmful and problematic. Views on this issue, which relate to freedom of thought and expression, vary widely depending on country, culture, context, and individual opinion. What is clear is that much more needs to be done to understand the relationship between radicalization and violent extremism, the processes leading from radicalization to violent extremism, as well as to clarify terms and concepts used to describe these issues. This paper presents current thinking and working definitions only, particularly focused on exploring factors that influence groups or individuals to turn to radicalization that leads to violence.

Push and pull factors

One way of conceptualizing the factors that may lead to radicalization or to violent extremism is the idea of 'push' and 'pull' influences[1].

'Push Factors' may include: marginalization, inequality, discrimination, persecution or the perception thereof, the denial of rights and civil liberties; and environmental, historical, or socioeconomic grievances, whether actual or perceived. Insights from studies on the relation between education, violent conflict and peacebuilding, illustrate how many of such conditions are connected to structural social injustices that can drive individuals or

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[1] Other conceptions have divided the factors into three groups: structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors (Khalil and Zeuthan, 2016).

groups to turn to acts of violence – which in some cases (however not exclusively) – are driven by extremist ideologies (see for instance Novelli, Lopes Cardozo and Smith, 2017).

'Pull Factors', by contrast, might nurture the appeal of violent extremism at the individual and psycho-social level. For example: violent extremist groups may be a source of services and employment. Groups may attract new members by providing outlets for grievances, the promise of hope, justice, and a sense of purpose and belonging. This social network can be a significant pull factor for youth as extremist groups offer youth a sense of acceptance and validation (UNESCO, 2016).

However, there remains very little evidence of exactly whether, how, and in what way these push or pull factors influence may people's choices to join extremist groups or commit violent acts.

What is preventing violent extremism?

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) refers to an approach which aims to address the root causes of violent extremism through non-coercive approaches. In an education context PVE could, for example, include working through schools to address inequality "push factors" in the curriculum, for example by building trust and tolerance between different groups of children and youth, and strengthening community social cohesion. Schools can foster a space for connections within a community, bringing together groups of different ethnicities, cultures and ideologies, who work together for the benefit of their children's education. Building relationships based on trust within communities is an essential component of PVE. From a sustainable peacebuilding perspective, preventing acts of violence and more structural forms of injustices and violent conflict requires substantive engagement with education governance, policies, and implementation (Smith, Datzberger and McCully, 2016).

'Counterterrorism' versus 'Preventing Violent Extremism'

Traditional counterterrorism focuses on the denial of opportunities for terrorist activity by disrupting

recognized terrorist groups. PVE, by contrast, aims to get to the root of violent extremism by challenging the 'push' and 'pull factors' that can lead to radicalization and violence. It aims to prevent the recruitment of individuals into violent extremist groups by providing positive alternatives to engagement or reengagement in violent extremism (Zeiger, 2015).

PVE also seeks to prevent the spread of violent extremism by building resilience and critical thinking within citizens, and strengthening their commitment to non-violence and peace (UNESCO, 2017). In order to work on prevention, a context-specific analysis of the root causes that drive acts of violence driven by extremist ideologies is needed in order to develop meaningful and sustainable responses and approaches.

PVE needs a context-specific approach and can be carried out at multiple levels:

- **People:** Engaging with multiple stakeholders at all levels of society to promote activities and behavior that can mitigate the threat of violent extremism and discourage people from joining violent extremist groups. These stakeholders could be, for example, police, teachers, social workers, child protection specialists, health officials, religious leaders, community leaders, parents, and youth, including youth-led and youth-focused organizations (schools, sports clubs, art clubs, and so on).

- **Programs:** Building the capacity of national, regional, and community-based actors to support and implement existing or new programs that make individuals and communities less susceptible to violent extremism or that provide positive and relevant alternatives for those at risk of recruitment by extremist groups.

- **Policies and governance:** Working at the level of the national or local government to encourage the governance of formal education systems and consequent policy design and implementation to address structural drivers of social inequalities and tensions.

A sustainable approach to peacebuilding through education systems and programs would need to engage with four interconnected dimensions (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo and Smith, 2017), conceptualized as '4Rs':

1) **Redistribution |** the allocation and redistribution of resources, and addressing whether schools and learning spaces operate in integrated or rather in parallel or segregated ways;

2) **Recognition |** to develop inclusive, comparative and relevant curricula that do justice to various (ethnic, linguistic, religious, gendered or other) diversities to ensure that education supports students' identity-building from a perspective of respect and plurality;

3) **Representation |** assessing ways in which education policy-design, implementation and decision-making processes are inclusive of multiple voices and perspectives, including those of marginalized groups (students, teachers, etc.), at national, local and school levels;

4) **Reconciliation |** addressing the ways in which education systems, resources and learning interactions deal with grievances and tensions of the past, and negotiate non-violent means to foster social cohesion and plural societies (see also Datzberger, Smith and McCully, 2016; Sayed and Novelli, 2016; Lopes Cardozo, Higgins and Le Mat, 2016).

Why education and PVE?

The importance of addressing violent extremism has recently gained global attention, especially in relation to its impact on children and youth and their potential role in prevention. This issue was internationally acknowledged and supported through the Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace, presented to heads of government in September 2015, as well as through the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security. Moreover, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, launched in 2015, highlights the importance of quality education in reducing poverty and social marginalization, as well as in fostering respect for human rights and diversity, developing critical thinking, and contributing to peaceful coexistence and tolerance (UN Security Council, 2015; Report of the Secretary-General, 2015; UNESCO 2016). These international agendas state the importance of education in reducing violence and contributing to harmonious societies.

Even still, the complex relationship between education, radicalization, and violent extremism is not fully understood (Zeiger, 2014). It has been argued that there are two "faces" to education; it can promote inclusion, strengthen social cohesion, support the emotional development of children, and help develop engaged citizens (Bush and Salterili, 2000). On the other hand, education can exacerbate existing tensions and divisions, foster exclusion and inequality, and promote harmful ideologies and behavior (Bush and Salterili, 2000). Consequently, education initiatives must look within and beyond the classroom and into the broader mechanisms of governance, inclusion, and representation to address the root causes that underlie different forms of violence and violent extremism. Education can play a critical role in addressing the 'push' and 'pull factors' that lead to violent extremism and other forms of violence (Global Counterterrorism Forum, 2014).

Listed below are some examples of how education can contribute towards preventing violence:

1) **Curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogical approaches:** Curricula and educational materials shouldn't promote only one viewpoint, for example, using history lessons to present a biased view of past events. Curricula should encourage multiple viewpoints and develop critical thinking skills. Aspects of the curricula that contribute to marginalization and exclusion should be addressed during the process of curricula design or re-design, as well as during teacher education and training. Education materials (both for teaching and learning) should be cleared of divisive stereotypes.

2) **Teachers:** Teachers should be recruited to represent a diverse range of social and ethnic groups and differing views within a society. When the teaching staff is made up of one social group it can reinforce existing societal inequalities and serve to cause further division. Teachers should be supported and trained to be able to provide a quality, relevant and inclusive learning experience for all children. Teachers can serve as a bridge between schools, families and the broader community to ensure that all concerned stakeholders are working towards a

common goal to support and assist learners at risk (UNESCO, 2017; Sayed and Novelli, 2016).

3) **Children and Young People:** Education should include the voices of children and young people and give them power over their own lives. Education should support each student – regardless of age, gender, race, religious beliefs or political views – as an individual with opinions, needs, and aspirations. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 urges Member States to give youth a greater voice in decision making at the local, national, regional and international levels, and focuses on enabling youth to become agents of change in their communities.

4) **Schools and Educational institutions:** Schools should create an atmosphere of critical inquiry from a perspective of respect, intercultural understanding, and harmony. Schools should engage with the community, including religious and political institutions, and ensure they provide a safe space for everyone, including minorities and non-traditional students (such as migrants in new hosting societies). Schools play an important role in amplifying or minimizing the voices of youth. As such, they should enable youth participation and expression. Schools can also help youth develop new narratives grounded in conflict resolution as opposed to violence.

5) **Safe Places:** Communities must ensure schools are safe. Safe to be in, and safe to get to – for boys and girls; safe places to discuss differing opinions, and safe environments to learn new ideas and skills, with mechanisms to discourage and prevent bullying, and all forms of violence, whether perpetrated by students or educational staff (UNESCO, 2017).

6) **Access:** Access to education should be universal. Socioeconomic status should not be a barrier to a quality education. Nor should gender, ethnicity, or language, religion or sexual orientation.

7) **Assessing risks and protecting education actors:** considering the complex and often sensitive nature of educational mechanisms to work on preventing (various forms of) violence, programmatic attention and additional research is needed to uncover potential risks involved for schools, educators and students. Attempts to ban violence or perceived violent extremist ideology that lack contextual knowledge, understanding or nuance, could (unintentionally) lead to further stigmatization, stereotyping or ethnic divides, elsewhere referred to as the 'negative face' of education (Bush and Salterili, 2000). Moreover, education staff and students are increasingly victims of direct violent attacks. Any program aimed at preventing violent extremism should take into account the vulnerability of education personnel and students, and the local context within which the program operates. The protection and safety of staff and students should be the first consideration of any such program. There is increasing global advocacy calling for the protection of education from direct attack. For more information see the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack website – www.protectingeducation.org.

Whilst alone not necessarily sufficient for removing the threat of violent extremism, these considerations can help to contribute to the promotion of peaceful, equitable societies, and enabling environments where children and young people feel able to express their views, grapple with complex issues, and find meaningful opportunities to engage with society and with their communities.

To support this work on PVE, INEE has gathered resources on education and preventing violent extremism from around the world, which may be useful for policy-makers, teachers, principals, trainers, and researchers to understand better the link between education and violent extremism and promote the positive 'face' of education.

For more, go to www.ineesite.org/en/preventing-violent-extremism

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