



# **The role of teachers in prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation in schools: the Belgian experience**

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## **Abstract**

The role of educators in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation has been widely discussed in Belgium since the 2016 Brussels attacks and due to the current rise of right-wing extremists in Europe and in the country. This paper describes the results of the pilot project developed within the European Union Horizon 2020 project, Mindb4ACT. The pilot was an experiment on designing innovative solutions for teachers of secondary schools in Belgium. Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Institute for European Studies, as the project partner, produced an animated video. The video was meant to raise awareness of the role of teachers in the prevention process, outline the basic policy mechanisms as the foundation for teachers' actions, and offer selected methodological tools for teachers to apply in the classroom.

## **Keywords**

Teachers, radicalisation, prevention

## **1. Introduction**

Due to the recent rise of different extreme ideologies in Europe, it is crucial to work towards more cohesive societies. Education plays a key role in promoting shared EU values and fostering cultural dialogue, mutual understanding and social integration. Teachers are at the front line to help students of various backgrounds to enter society and develop their active citizenship. When talking about radicalisation and violence, it also falls on the shoulders of educators to get involved in preventive activities. However, are teachers prepared to do so? Do they see themselves in this role? What can they do in the classroom to contribute to prevention?

Belgian schools have been gradually adjusting to the situation of change and growing pressure to contribute to early prevention and information sharing with security agents. The school initiatives remain rather fragmental, and educators are somewhat frustrated by encountering challenges on the way. In 2019, in the framework of the H2020 Mindb4ACT Project, WP6, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) developed an evidence-based pilot project titled 'Guidelines for building the Lab for Democracy to prevent violent radicalisation in Belgian schools'. The project was inspired by the Radicalisation Awareness Network's policy paper calling to transform schools into labs for democracy to address the issues of prevention more effectively. The selected techniques from the paper were adapted to the Belgian context. The target of the pilot was to give voice to educational stakeholders, in particular secondary school teachers, to identify their current needs in prevention of violent extremism. Together with other

stakeholders, the VUB team aimed at developing a tool that would inspire teachers towards action by demonstrating the value of suggested pedagogical methods and techniques. The pilot aligned with the Mindb4ACT Project's main idea to organise small-scale ethical innovative interventions through pilots by using the participatory Living Lab methodology. The added value of the intervention is the contribution to the innovative toolkit for various types of stakeholders dealing with early prevention.

Based on the results of the pilot project, this paper will underpin the main obstacles interfering with the efforts of educators to organise preventive activities in classrooms in Belgian secondary schools. In more detail, the paper will: 1) Describe first-hand experiences of Belgian educators dealing with young people in schools; 2) Highlight challenges met by educators; and 3) Suggest avenues for responding to the identified challenges in a practical manner.

## 2. Methodology and sources

Firstly, for the purpose of the project, namely collecting data and first-hand experiences from various education professionals and other stakeholders working in the crosscutting fields, VUB conducted a series of focus groups and meetings organised in 2018-2019. These activities were implemented drawing upon the Mindb4ACT Living Lab methodology. It is worth to mention that living lab is an open ecosystem, implying co-development of innovative solutions together with end-users in a multi-stakeholder partnership (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Ståhlbröst 2009). In the context of Mindb4ACT, this methodology allowed for: 1) collecting empirical data from the community of practise and end-users in order to co-design pilot projects; and 2) co-implement, co-validate and co-evaluate the designed solutions. The gathered empirical data, which is especially valuable for the research on CVE and PVE, was specifically intended for identifying the gaps in professional preventive practices. The collected standpoints were further used for the analysis provided in this paper.

With respect to the applied models and theories, VUB adapted the 2018 paper "*Transforming schools into labs for democracy: A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education*" developed by the European Commission Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). The paper discusses the whole-school approach to establishing certain conditions for students and teachers that would facilitate prevention work and activities. For instance, schools are called to be involved in sharing democratic values, building up literacy in religion or media, and contributing to depolarisation. Although it contains many useful tips and examples, the paper offers a rather generic presentation of the concept without any tailored mechanism for school transformations. It thus leaves room for adaptation of this idea, by localisation of the approach to reflect (and respond to) the specific national context and school setting. Ultimately, in the pilot project we put into practice several aspects of this approach, discussed them with Belgian educators and developed some tailor-made solutions.

Secondly, besides those with education actors, VUB also organised meetings with other Belgian stakeholders from security sectors to have a clear idea on the chain of actors involved in prevention. Many national bodies focus their activities around the psycho-social theory of Fathali M. Moghaddam's (2005), *The Staircase to Terrorism*, which we also deployed while searching for solutions for teachers and young people. The theory explores a number of psychological factors leading an individual to commit a terrorist act. Among these factors are psychological injustice of material conditions, perceived options to fight unfair treatment, displacement and aggression, moral engagement, polarisation, and sidestepping inhibitions. This theory was precisely used to formulate teachers' guidelines on the work with school students by addressing the aforementioned factors.

Thirdly, the project took into consideration the concept of *polarisation* outlined by the Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma (2017). The theory is largely promoted at the Belgian Regional level and its terminology penetrates the work of Belgian communities, including schools. According to the author, polarisation is the reinforcement of oppositions between groups in a society that may result in tensions and violence between these groups. It is a thought construct based on the categorisation of identities and a world defined by the 'us vs. them' dichotomy. Being polarised means upholding a hardened opposing position. It is widely regarded as a factor leading to radicalisation of an individual. In 2017 RAN also produced a paper on polarisation management in schools (RAN 2017) by claiming teachers need to oppose and prevent polarisation in the classroom. VUB relied on this theory to discuss classroom dynamics that may potentially carry risks for radicalisation.

### **3. Pilot project background**

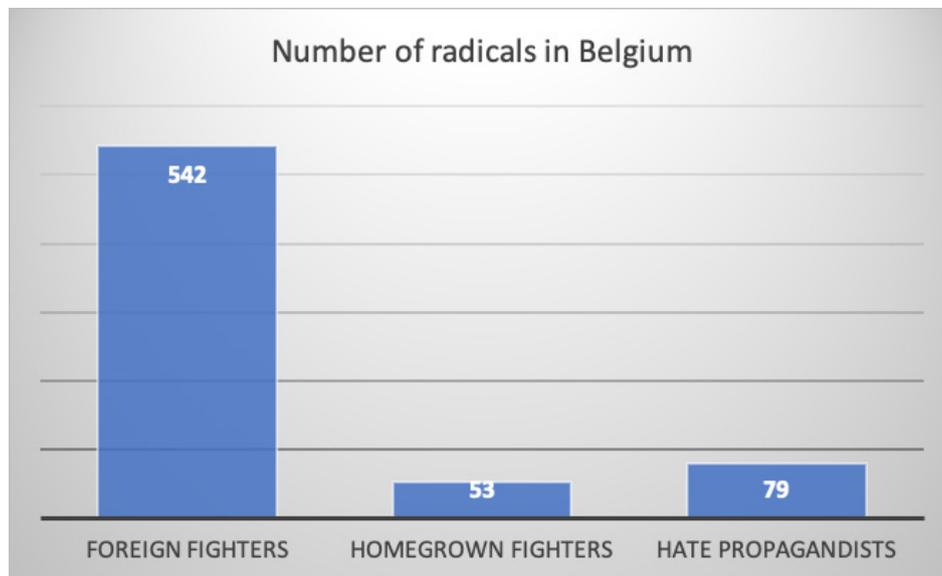
#### *3.1. Education locus in the state counter-radicalisation policy agenda*

The Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAM) contains a Common Database (Banque de Données Commune) of radicalised individuals presenting a hypothetical threat. Young people under 18 are also part of the database. These individuals are labelled as: Foreign Terrorist Fighter, Homegrown Terrorist Fighter or Hate Propagandist; some have several labels but as of early 2020 there has not been a single individual bearing the three labels simultaneously. Right wing extremists belong to the hate propagandists' group. The OCAM controls monitoring of these individuals by sharing information with the law enforcement and socio-preventive structures. On 15 January 2020<sup>1</sup>, the database contained information on 664 individuals (see Fig. 1), with foreign fighters representing the biggest group.

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<sup>1</sup> Information received directly from OCAM.

Figure 1. OCAM Common database 15.01.2020



A 2018 European Parliament study located Belgium among those EU Member States with the highest number of foreign fighters who have departed for Syria since 2012 (European Parliament, 2018). In 2019, some media outlets had the number at 426 fighters (The Brussels Times, 2019).

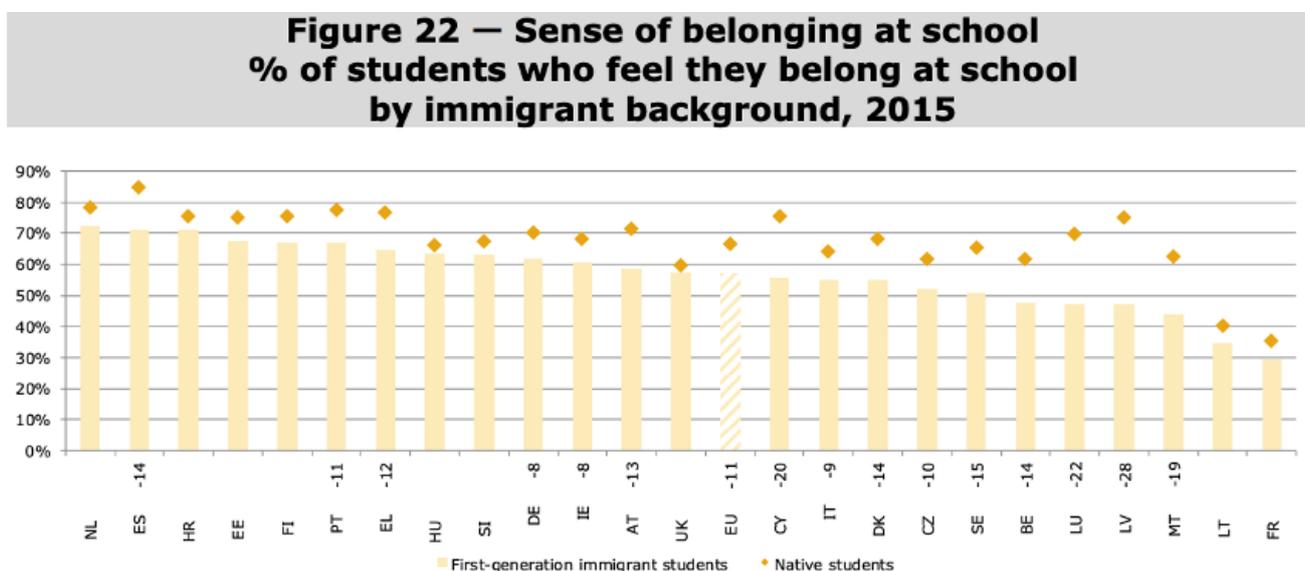
Young people under 18, often the target of the recruiters, were recruited through several networks – Sharia4Belgium operating in Antwerp and the city of Vilvoorde; Resto du Tawheed, active around Brussels North train station; and the Zerkani, performing in Brussels around the Molenbeek district. Social media and the internet have also been apparent spaces for recruitment (Van Ostaen, 2016, p. 8). Scholars argue that the digital infrastructure provides a platform for connectivity and virtual participation, serving as an ‘echo-chamber for likeminded extremist views’ (RAN 2016a, p. 4; Von Behr et al., 2013; Edwards and Gribbon, 2013). The young people involved were of different backgrounds. Some of them came from disadvantaged families, some had a criminal record. Others were highly educated (Van Ostaen, *ibid.*).

Following the Brussels attacks in 2016, radicalisation in schools has become a hot topic discussed by both policy and education experts. The stigma of ‘the country with home-grown terrorists’ has dogged Belgium since then. Belgian educators have been keen to find the answers to the following questions: What makes young people share ideologies of radical groups and join extremist movements? How can

we tackle radicalisation through education? How can we define/identify the signs of radicalisation in classrooms? These and other questions make Belgian educators take an introspective look at the challenges that young people undergo inside and outside schools.

As early as 2015, the OECD Pisa survey data reported an alarming number of students of migrant background lacking a sense of belonging in Belgian schools (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. OECD Pisa data, 2015 (European Commission, *Education and Training Monitor* 2018 p. 49)



Evidently, European values, a buzzword in any policy discussion, are not completely shared by all young people. This seemingly creates a conflict of ideologies and views gradually leading to isolation. Disturbing psychological conditions of rejection and solitude eventually create space for seeking new reasons for existence and acceptance (see for example, Piazza, 2011; Feddes et al., 2015; RAN, 2016a; Campelo et al., 2018; López and Pašić, 2018).

Dandurand argues that the different mindset hinders social identification processes (Dandurand in Lombardi et al., 2015, p. 30). As a result, cultural identity and cultural experiences make individuals view their world from a particular angle (Berry and Candis, 2013, p. 44). This to a greater extent concerns people of immigrant background shaping their unique picture of the societies in which they are located.

In the opinion of some of the interviewed stakeholders, young people in Belgium, especially those of immigrant background, feel squeezed inside the system that is meant to frame one's mind, opinion and vision of life. Apparently, the system pushes them out to look for the sense of belonging in a particular group of like-minded people. One representative of the legal stakeholders mentioned that Belgian society may seem rather oppressive for some individuals, for example when not allowing Belgian children captured in Syrian camps to come back home, or when adopting oppressive control in prisons and detention centres, or when putting the names of radicalised people in the national database based on the limited evidence and unclear definition of 'radicalisation'. The disappointment and non acceptance of the surrounding system plays into the hands of recruiters. They know what to promise young people and 'sell' their ideas as talentedly as Marketing Strategists.

### *3.2. Teachers' preparedness to respond to the signs of radicalisation*

To begin with, the Federal *Plan R (The Action Plan Against Radicalism)* developed at the Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment does not fully specify the role of teachers and educators in prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. The only reference regarding teachers concerns their participation in the information exchange with security services within the Local Task Force (Plan R, p. 4). A clear mechanism of such exchange does not exist, which makes it rather complex for educators to intervene. However, this does not mean inaction by local authorities and educational entities altogether. Worthy of mention are relevant, stand-alone initiatives that not only involve information exchange, but also facilitate teachers' overall preparedness in responding to radicalisation-related challenges in classrooms, in different parts of Belgium. For instance, Flanders' adoption of an 'Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation and Polarisation' in June 2017 features among these. The aim of the document is, among other things, 'to strengthen the capacity and resilience of pupils and teachers against radicalisation' (European Commission 2018c). In 2018, the Flemish Department of Education launched project calls for tackling polarisation and youth vulnerability in schools (EC Education and Training Monitor 2019). In one of the communes in Wallonia, a so-called Mobile Service Team acts

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<sup>2</sup> Le Centre de ressources et d'appui. The CREA is responsible for supporting both institutions and operators within the Wallonia-Brussels Federation in their actions to prevent violent extremism and radicalism. A range of initiatives contributes to this effort, i.e. free awareness/sensitisation formative modules/courses delivered to services and operators of the region, animation activities in schools, training on the prevention of violent extremism targeting members of the Ministry of the FW-B and the ONE, and a Resource Directory open for consultation (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Réseau de prise en charge des extrémismes et des radicalismes violents; <https://extremismes-violents.cfwb.be/ressources/>).

<sup>3</sup> Le Centre d'aide et de prise en charge de toute personne concernée par les radicalismes et extrémismes violents). The CAPREV offers professional and personalised support through a free and anonymous hotline as well as individual socio-psychological counselling (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Réseau de prise en charge des extrémismes et des radicalismes violents; <https://extremismes-violents.cfwb.be/aide/>).

as a mediator between an individual student and a school, in an attempt to fight dropout rates and violence in schools. The request for intervention by this team should follow from Wallonian primary and secondary school heads, or the government. It provides consultation services for educators on critical cases related to the signs of radicalisation (2014 Circulaire 496, 2014). Two resource centres (CREA<sup>2</sup> and CAPREV<sup>3</sup>) providing support to educators, among other people, were created in Wallonia.

The pilot project operated by VUB, among other things, targeted at analysing teachers' preparedness to detect and professionally react to the signs of radicalisation. In the course of the meetings and focus groups with Belgian education experts and other stakeholders with expertise in radicalisation and security, VUB discussed everyday experiences, challenges and gaps in regard to the understanding of radicalisation, detection of warning indicators and action towards early prevention. The majority admitted a lack of knowledge around the concept of radicalisation. Even with no assessment parameters against which to evaluate teachers' expertise and knowledge, the results of the discussion pointed to a number of gaps. The major problems were identified as the teachers' contextual understanding of the phenomenon of radicalisation and the lack of practical pedagogical solutions applicable in the classrooms.

Specifically, education stakeholders expressed concerns about grasping the difference between radicalisation and extremism, and their relation to terrorism respectively. What is more, the notion of radicalisation remains vague for many (CONRAD, 2019). Legally, the concept itself is indeed not part of any piece of Belgian national legislation; rather, it has been ballooning lately – surging to some sort of *default* explanation in relation to terrorist phenomena (ibid.). On the other hand, terrorism is specified in the Belgian Penal Code, art. 137 (in force: 08-01-2004) as:

[...] an offence that by its nature or context, can seriously harm a country or an international organization. This is an act that is committed intentionally with the aim of seriously intimidating a population or to unduly compel public authorities or an international organization to perform or refrain from performing an act, or to seriously destabilize or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or of an international organization. (Belgian Penal Code, art. 137)

The understanding of radicalisation often borders with the definition of terrorism (CONRAD 2019, p. 7), which, among other things, includes intentional homicide or deliberate assault, hostage taking, killing, massive destruction or degradation, and hijacking of aircraft. An appreciation of radicalisation as a peaceful process and a form of expression of democracy is rather uncommon, or better said, unpopular. Radicalisation seems to be initially associated with a very high predisposition to violence (on the non-violent process towards

the state of radicalisation, see Mc Cauley and Moskalenko 2008; Reinares et al. 2008; Vidino 2010; Schmid 2013). The majority of teachers would then ask: 'Can we talk about "peaceful" radicalisation? Where is the border between violence and radicalisation? How can we find out the degree of students' radicalisation?' Even though certain support tools/mechanisms for educators exist, most of the teachers either are not aware of them, do not have enough time to look for them, or more basically do not even know where to look for them. Another challenge expressed by the interviewed stakeholders relates to the limited knowledge about the Belgian national approach towards counter radicalisation and the actors involved. It is a fact that, within the formal education system, a teacher's life is regimented by school curricula and the profile of the subject they teach. It does not seem easy for an average Belgian schoolteacher to find extra time for extracurricular self-education, especially when not directly aligning with the specific subject they are in charge of. Regional specificities regarding teachers' experiences in terms of workload and workflow within the broader national educational system add yet another layer of difficulty (on the inter-regional discrepancies more broadly, see for example Hindriks and Verschelde, 2011; Vandenberghe, 2011; OECD 2015; Dupriez, et al. 2018). It is also uncommon to organise large teachers' gatherings (in a variety of its forms, such as forums, seminars, symposiums, etc.) and meetings with Belgian authorities, simply because the mandate of the particular bodies does not presuppose such meetings. Therefore, the exchange of information between schools and security bodies happens ad hoc on a case-to-case basis. As to the last point, the desire to make such exchange mandatory has been voiced by some stakeholders, with the view to stand a better chance at early stage interventions.

From a methodological perspective, the teachers flagged a significant lack of tools (and capacities) that they could apply in the classrooms or use for self-training. In general, they do not know where to search for these tools, how they work and whether these can be freely used in the class without first having to receive official permission from the management. The lack of awareness and certain tools pushes teachers either to improvise or neglect the issue. For instance, there was a real case when a student brought a Koran to school and a teacher did not know how to react; thus, the issue remained unresolved by the teacher. Or, there was a case when a teacher of a foreign language out of the blue asked students to provide a monologue on the topics of 'Would I leave for Syria?' or 'Is it radical to be a vegan?'. Without giving any background to the questions, they might not be the most successful pedagogical solutions. Evidently, the scarcity of appropriate resources and information makes teachers look for individual solutions, without proper preparedness and support.

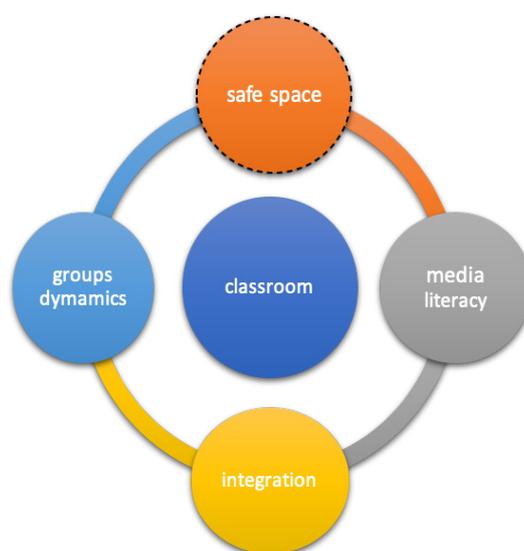
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<sup>4</sup> Titled *Educational tool for teachers on prevention of radicalisation in the classroom*, the video is available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLQMHOZSbGw>.

### 3.3. Innovative methods for tackling the signs of radicalisation in the classroom

The pilot project oriented towards the creation of the innovative solution for end users coming from the field of education. *The OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning Environments* provides the following definition of innovation: ‘fresh ways of meeting outstanding challenges in a spirit of openness to disciplined experimentation’ (OECD, 2017, p. 18). The pilot experiment relied upon the Mindb4ACT Living Lab methodology, which sees both stakeholder and end users involved in the co-design of the innovative solution, designed to take into account the interests and needs of the project’s target group. At this stage of the project, Belgian stakeholders drew attention to the lack of interactive materials available online. Based on the observed scarcity, the VUB team created an animated video<sup>4</sup> for Belgian stakeholders which was subsequently uploaded to the Mindb4ACT YouTube channel. In light of educators’ shortage of time for reading long manuals, the video constitutes a particularly valuable resource to get the main messages and ideas across in a concise yet impactful way, contributing to the enrichment of the educational environment. An information-based practical tool, the video provides stakeholders from the education field with an arsenal of methods and techniques designed for youth-targeted work on the issues of extreme ideologies and violence. The video offers some tips and recommendations for organising preventive work in the classrooms of secondary schools. The animated version of the video was also a way to provide an ethical solution to the problem. It did not feature any personal data and told the story of an average Belgian teacher who posed various questions concerning radicalisation. Since the Belgian national CVE strategy does not sufficiently highlight the role of education in the prevention realm, the video was also meant to draw attention to the crucial role of an educator. In a nutshell, the video provided: 1) background information on the Belgian school system and the state prevention strategy, and 2) practical tips and suggestions for the transformation of Belgian schools into Labs for Democracy based on RAN’s definitions. The practical methodological suggestions were given to inspire teachers to re-organise their traditional classroom activities (see Fig. 3)

Figure 3. Suggestions for the focused in-classroom activities.



- Firstly, as reiterated by education stakeholders, creating a safe space for students is necessary, where they can freely raise their concerns and confidently share their ideas – fundamental to the establishment of a trusting relationship. The output for young people is as equally important as input. The chance of being heard changes their relationship with the outside world. It not only teaches them tolerance and acceptance but also raises their self-esteem (Feddes et al., 2015). The creation of spaces for dialogue at the grassroots level has in fact proved pivotal in contributing to the prevention of youth violent radicalisation (Aiello et al., 2018).<sup>5</sup> This also helps them feel like an integral part of the group. Belgian educators who organise similar activities pointed out at the focus group meeting that students often feel ‘locked in’ the classroom; therefore, more freedom outside standard spaces might be considered as an option to maximise the desire to speak out and open up. For instance, a teacher can organise debate clubs or forums, upon agreement with the school management. Since confronting students with a specific topic might constitute a withdraw factor (i.e. the topic might scare them off, make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe to speak out, etc), it is of extreme importance to select a subject that equally meets their interest and their predisposition/willingness to engage. A teacher, may, for instance, organise an anonymous survey and ask students what exactly they want to discuss. It might also be risky to directly discuss the issues of radicalisation and use related terminology without proper contextualisation, and therefore a teacher might find it useful to focus on adjacent topics, for instance: What makes us different?; Do we all think the same way?; What is peace? and What is violence?, etc.
- Strengthening media and technology literacy should not be limited only to teaching students to use ICT. Development of the critical thinking and understanding of the social impact of ICT is crucial for preventive work (see for example Pawels et al., 2014, Reeves and Lane, 2015). The manipulative power of language to lead to bullying, hate speech, or online propaganda is among those issues which require teachers’ responses. Therefore, a teacher can, for example, pick up some examples of the online content which should be critically assessed by students (RAN, 2016b, UNESCO, 2016).
- Fostering social integration through education is the message put forward by the EU authorities (Eurydicy, 2019). The absence of the feeling of belonging at school causes alienation and might lead to polarisation and stigmatisation (Ventriglio and Bhugra 2019). This aspect is one of the psychological factors that might further lead to violence, as posited in Moghaddam’s theory. The fact that many students of migrant background remain carriers of another culture should be accepted and respected by educators. Children should have the freedom to express that part of

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<sup>5</sup> In their study, the authors bring to the fore, among other factors, for example, ‘the importance of creating spaces in which dialogue about extremist messages and violent radicalisation can take place, without being judged or ridiculed for their opinions and standpoints, but in which arguments are provided to critically reflect on these ideas.’ (Aiello et al., p. 442).

<sup>6</sup> For a wider appreciation of the point, see for example the PRACTICE project website at: <https://practice-school.eu>.

their identity in a peaceful manner and should not hide it; thus, the classroom has to be open for experiments. In this sense, the growing diversity arising from migration can be read as a great opportunity for the education system, insofar as teachers and educators altogether are prompted to rethink their pedagogical approaches and teaching styles to address the specific needs of each student and create opportunities for them to overcome adversity by forging and maintaining an all-round identity (OECD, 2018). Merging the students of migrant background via carefully designed activities might be a channel to foster dialogue and encourage exchange, thus facilitating the dismantling of barriers. Potential initiatives include, for example, a 'culture day', where various cultural specificities are discussed, and the cultural artefacts and traditions (clothes, literature, food, music, traditions) are demonstrated for all students.

- Understanding group dynamics in the classrooms is part of the teachers' preparedness to respond to the signs of radicalisation.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it is equally important to teach students to understand what a group is, how a group functions and what position an individual can take in it. It is necessary to teach students to critically reflect on their own belonging to certain groups. A teacher can organise a discussion in the classroom on grouping and focus on the signs of divisive behaviour, resistance to influence, understanding of rules, memberships and group ideologies. A priority should be given to the discussion about conformism and freedom of expression.

The suggestions for teachers are not limited to the ones presented in this article. They can be taken as a foundation and an inspiration for schools to develop their unique pedagogical solutions facilitating prevention of violence and impacting alienation and radicalisation (RAN, 2019).

## Conclusion

The role of teachers in the prevention of radicalisation is significantly understudied. The phenomenon of radicalisation is constantly evolving, which in turn requires an ongoing search for new tools and solutions. Formal education needs to speed up its responses to current societal challenges in order to keep up with the ever-growing pace of developments.

Belgian educators feel confronted with high expectations from the general public to recognise the signs of radicalisation in students, to organise preventive activities and, in general, to have full expertise in addressing these challenges. However, these expectations share little with the reality on the ground. A teacher today is restricted within a formal regulated system offering limited possibilities and limited space which severely hamper the identification of long term, quality solutions.

Beyond flagging the existing gaps in teachers' experience, this article provided suggestions that can inspire teachers (together with the school management) to reorganise activities in the classroom, or simply bring innovative elements into the established system.

To be more effective, the work with teachers should start with answering their questions and filling in the information breaches. It may require very specific knowledge that can only be obtained through contact with various types of professionals, such as social workers, government officials. It then makes sense to specify the national approach and outline the main policy actors working around prevention. It is crucial to place teachers in the chain of the prevention security actors operating on the ground. This will create a clear understanding of teachers' mandate and help manage public expectations simultaneously.

In classrooms, teachers can only engage with issues revolving around predispositions to radicalisation and potential violence. Specifically, they can work towards increasing the sense of belonging in schools and the understanding of group dynamics and strengthening critical thinking on the usage of ICT.

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