Newsletter

EDURAD: ADDRESSING VIOLENT RADICALISATION: A MULTI-ACTOR RESPONSE THROUGH EDUCATION

EDURAD: Educational Responses to Extremism

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Thinking About Extremism

Why Educational Responses to Extremism?

A growing field of research in this area has sought to understand better what constitutes an educational response to questions of extremism, radicalisation and violent radicalisation. Part of this involves thinking about how concepts like prevention and security are understood by educational practitioners as opposed to, for example, those involved in security or even criminal justice. EDURAD was conceived in order to deepen reflection, understanding and practical responses to these questions. Education is often seen as a tool to solve the problems of society, but the unintended consequences of viewing education in this way means that we may see education in the service of democracy rather

than also seeing democracy in the service of education and thus of the next generation. The project builds on existing research and engages in dialogue with a range of stakeholders. It is particularly attentive and sensitive to the fact that young people want and need to explore different ways of being in the world. For some this will mean looking for security and certainty, for others it will mean seeking out risk and adventure, and part of this involves seeking purpose, meaning, and agency. It's important to support their explorations of and experimentation with identity, ideological positions, and relationships, whilst also supporting them to contextualise, explore, and evaluate different beliefs and positions and their own desires and investments.

What is different about this project?

In this project, we were clear that we didn't want to reinvent the wheel and we wanted to build on the practice, research and knowledge base that already existed. However, we noticed that many responses to dealing with difficult or controversial issues adopted a critical thinking framework. Whilst this is important, the evidence suggests that it is insufficient and that it fails to engage not only with the motivations of young people, with 'how ideas feel', and with what engagement with both different groupings and different ideas offers someone in terms of purpose, agency, belonging - what Scott Atran calls 'sacred values'. We draw on a number of different sources to theorise our approach, including Gert Biesta's writings on the beautiful risk of education. We wanted to make sure that our approach involves spaces for existential exploration, reflection, experimentation, and dialogue for young people without imposing a coercive idea of the 'ideal' young person or citizen.

In this regard, we were cautious of too quickly positioning young people who are interested in or even who become involved in extremism as vulnerable. We also drew on Quassim Cassam's philosophical analysis of extremism, in part as a tool to analyse and explore the affective, or emotional, desires for purity, certainty and identity, whilst re-positioning this framework in the field of adolescence.

Finally, although it was clear that while as researchers that we shared values and commitments, it also became swiftly evident that our approach needed to be pluralistic, sensitive and responsive to context. Not only did each country context have different histories of practices of engaging with these issues, the ways in which they framed and responded to questions of extremism, radicalisation and violent extremism and radicalisation were also very different. Perhaps one common blind-spot was the challenge each had in facing difficult pasts in ways that could enable deep reflection and transformation.

Our aim is to put practitioners, policymakers and young people all of whom have different perspectives on these questions into conversation with one another.

How did we design the project?

Our learning from this first phase of research of policy, research literature and practice framed our conceptualisation of the research design. It became quite clear that a generic approach was not appropriate – some countries had well established networks and practices in respect of prevention of extremism, whilst others with different histories and different perspectives on the question adopted other frameworks. We adopted a broadly similar approach which was tailored to context by first

developing a comprehensive reflective survey in each country targeted at practitioners and policymakers. This was followed up by in-depth focus groups. What emerged across the board from these was a desire to have spaces for thought, reflection and exchange expressed by the practitioners and policymakers. They also wanted to have the opportunity to share with and learn from one another in their own country context and with others. Each partner country has responded by developing pedagogical modules to capacity-build with practitioners and policymakers, and by either working with existing hubs or developing new hubs.

What are the challenges?

Educators need to respond to those extremist positions that are committed to purity, to monologue and to the refusal to listen to other perspectives, to 'monocultural' understandings of the human condition, and indeed to the violent refusal of difference. One example of monoculturalism and the desire for 'purity' is the Great Replacement Theory. Paulo Freire's reminder that education is never neutral cannot be forgotten. What is helpful for educators is to have a repertoire of pedagogical responses that can support and foster the young person whilst also caring for the others in the educational setting, in particular those most impacted by expressions and discourses of hate.

Again, being able to make judgements is key here: When is this a pedagogical moment? When is it a pastoral moment? When is it that very rare moment where another kind of intervention is required? There is a risk in preventative approaches to extremism and radicalisation that if framed through a security lens, they fail to do justice educationally and can see risk as something that must be managed and controlled. But education is always risky, just as democracy is risky and an ongoing project. We can't and don't want to control the minds and worlds of the young, but we need to also give them a context for their actions and dreams and a sense of perspective both historically and in terms of our contemporary world.

Dialogic and critical thinking approaches won't necessarily engage the deeper existential motivations and fears that may be orienting the young as they find their place in the world. It is important however to understand how ideas are shaped and sometimes manipulated, in particular in relation to technology. So, the question is how to engage affectively in ways that allow for exploration and awareness of ideas and beliefs and how to enable the young to move beyond powerlessness and meaninglessness, experiences particularly exacerbated by the pandemic, into new ways of connecting with their own 'sacred values'.

What are the findings?

Despite the considerable differences between the partner countries, there was striking commonality of values and concerns. These included a strengths-based and holistic approach to working with young people, the importance of trusting relationships, the need for safe spaces to explore difficult topics and for young people to speak freely, the need to create opportunities for democratic participation and to exercise democratic competence. Relating to the question of democracy and plurality, participants across the different partner countries noted how extremist positions were unable to tolerate difference or showed hostility or hatred

towards difference. A further topic that arose in different ways across contexts in respect of students was the importance of belonging, imagination, and purpose, the importance of engaging with emotions and affect, and the need to cultivate critical thinking. The need for educators to develop their own capacities for self-reflection and self-enquiry was seen as important, alongside developing relational skills and capacities in supporting open dialogue and questioning with young people. All participants across partner countries noted the importance of developing their own and their students' critical digital literacy skills, understood as also engaging with complex issues such as conspiracy theories. Finally, there was an appetite for continued exchange between a diverse range of practitioners, in particular teachers and youth workers, and learning from other partner contexts, as each partner's participants noted different needs for training and gaps in knowledge in their own context.

Six key themes arose:

1. Supporting critical thinking and critical dialogue, including conflict resolution and engaging in difficult conversations.

2. Exploring the affective lives of young people, including what belonging means and how it feels to belong or not belong with young people.

3. Engaging with difference, including complicating the stories of history and 'identitarian' narratives.

4. Cultivating democratic life and democratic culture, alongside a socio-ecological understanding of resilience and positive school climates with warm and loving relationships.

5. Developing youth work and educational approaches to critically and imaginatively engage with the digital world and online life.

6. Creating communities of practice and opportunities for self and co-enquiry, learning, and sharing for practitioners involved in education, in particular in engaging with issues relating to both extremism and violence.

There was also interest in further "unpacking" and exploring the question of extremism, with participants in both the Netherlands and Ireland noting their position that whilst education can be preventative, this is a (welcome) collateral benefit, and that education should not aim directly at prevention but rather at exploring and "unpacking" these complex questions with young people. Such an approach chimes with literature promoting critique and empowerment as a means of reducing vulnerability to extremist messaging, rather than the co-option of education in the service of government counter-terrorism objectives (Davies, 2009; O'Donnell, 2016). It also coheres with a growing body of scholarly work that seeks to decouple 'radical' ideas (deradicalisation) from 'radical' behaviour (disengagement), and thus implies a tolerance for radical ideology provided that it is not accompanied by violent actions (Horgan, 2009; Horgan and Braddock, 2010; Braddock, 2018).

Finally, a key theme that arose across all partner countries was the importance underlined by the practitioners and policymakers to have reflective spaces for dialogue, sharing, active listening, and exchange of both knowledge and pedagogical approaches. Indeed, the creation of such spaces can be understood as a pedagogical exercise supporting professional development. What was particularly valuable was talking to others from different professional backgrounds and experience, to learn how others approach shared questions and problems through their different lenses, and to reflect on how to develop relationships and dialogue both on and offline. The focus groups were seen as a valued and formative professional development space; one which a number of partner countries felt could also be enhanced by the voices of young people. There was little appetite for additional bespoke interventions and a mixed response to the need for resources. In some countries, like the Netherlands, there are plenty of resources available in the field and well-established networks, whilst in others like Ireland, participants felt there was a lack of resources and that they were not sure always where to seek knowledge. Nonetheless, a common theme was that all participants wanted to learn from one another in order to develop their pedagogical judgement and repertoire, and were keen to learn from international colleagues in a number of cases.

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