## EDURAD: Educational Responses to Extremism

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

**Project Acronym:** EDURAD
**Project Number:** 871110 (ISF-P)
**Work Package 2**
**Output 2.3**

**Team Information:**

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VU VRIJE
UNIVERSITEIT
AMSTERDAM

EDURAD
Educational responses to extremism

## The Netherlands: Mapping and Research Analysis 2.3

### Description of Fieldwork

*Ethics and Data Management*

The research plan satisfied all conditions of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam ethics approval process. All data collected through the questionnaires was entirely anonymous with no personal data collected.

At the beginning of the focus group sessions verbal consent of all participants was obtained, both to participate and for the session to be recorded.  The sessions were recorded using the Zoom record function directly to the researcher's computer. The video and audio recordings were then transferred to a secure university server accessible only to the researchers.  Transcriptions of the focus group are also stored on the secure server.

To comply with research integrity standards, on publication of the research, transcripts will be archived on the DarkStor secure server for 10 years.

*Participants and Procedure*

Data were collected through an online questionnaire and two online focus groups. The selection of participants for the questionnaire aimed to ensure that a cross section of individuals involved in questions around education and PVE could be reached.  This included teachers, youth workers, social workers, policy makers, and other practitioners such as mental health practitioners who work in educational environments.

As the Netherlands already has a number of networks of practitioners involved in PVE, participants were primarily recruited through these existing networks.  Respondents were also encouraged to share the invitation with other practitioners with whom they are in contact.  In total 97 invitations were sent out and 47 responses were received.

For the focus groups, participants were recruited around two grassroots informal educational practices in two different Dutch cities. We aimed for participants from different sectors and practices who work around the same geographic location, including policymakers, youth workers, teachers, and youth involved in the practices.  In total 13 people participated in the focus groups, 3 in the first and 10 in the second.

Given the current conditions with raising cases of Covid-19, focus groups were conducted online using Zoom. The sessions of the focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

*Analysis*

A thematic content analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted in order to identify key themes emerging across the questionnaires. A second reading of each questionnaire was conducted through the lens of these key themes to identify areas of consensus and divergence on these themes. Given the small sample size, analysis of the questionnaire did not aim at generalizable conclusions of Dutch educator perspectives on PVE-E. Rather the questionnaires were used as an exploratory tool to identify a range of issues and themes worthy of further exploration, in regards to PVE-E.

The focus groups sought to provide further context and deeper probing of some of the issues identified in the questionnaires. A thematic content analysis was conducted on the focus group transcripts. Key themes emerging in the initial analysis were compared between focus group participants and between the two focus groups as a whole. Areas of consensus were highlighted and divergent perspectives identified.

## Short summary and analysis of findings from questionnaires

Forty-seven respondents completed the online questionnaire. Participants came from a range of practices, including nine teachers, three youth workers, and six policy makers (Figure 1). Over half of the respondents have over ten years of experience in their practice, with only two having less than 3 years of experience (Figure 2).

## Area of Expertise

2. Wat is uw hoofdberoep of belangrijkste praktijk waarin u actief bent?

More Details

| | |
|---|---|
| ● Leerkracht / docent | 9 |
| ● Schoolmedewerker | 0 |
| ● Beleidsmaker | 6 |
| ● Jongerenwerker | 3 |
| ● Sociaal werker | 6 |
| ● (Inter)levensbeschouwelijk pro… | 1 |
| ● Coach / mentor | 2 |
| ● Other | 27 |
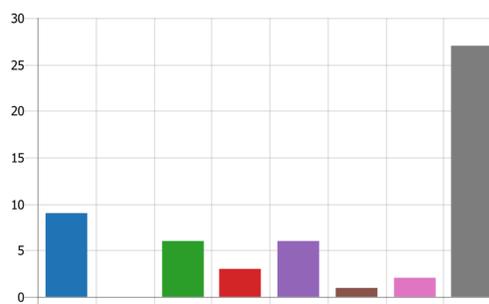
Figure 1

## Professional experience

3. Hoeveel jaar ervaring heeft u in dit domein?

More Details

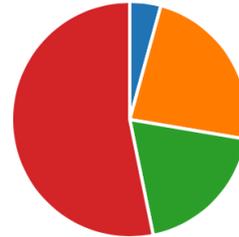| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 🔵 | 1-2 | 2 |
| 🟠 | 3-5 | 11 |
| 🟢 | 5-10 | 9 |
| 🔴 | 10+ | 25 |

Figure 2

## Types of intolerance encountered.

Respondents reported encountering a wide-range of forms of intolerance in their practice (Figure 3), with the most common being racism (89% of respondents) followed by religious intolerance (70%), with 'Alt-right' the least commonly reported (34%).

7. Komt u een van onderstaande tegen in uw praktijk?

More Details

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 🔵 | Racisme | 42 |
| 🟠 | Islamofobie | 30 |
| 🟢 | Jihadisme | 22 |
| 🔴 | Hate speech | 20 |
| 🟣 | Uiterst-rechts extremisme | 21 |
| 🟤 | Alt-right | 16 |
| 🩷 | Fundamentalisme/Dogmatisme | 24 |
| ⚫ | Homofobie | 28 |
| 🟡 | Sexisme | 25 |
| 🔵 | Religieuze intolerantie | 33 |
| 🔵 | Other | 10 |
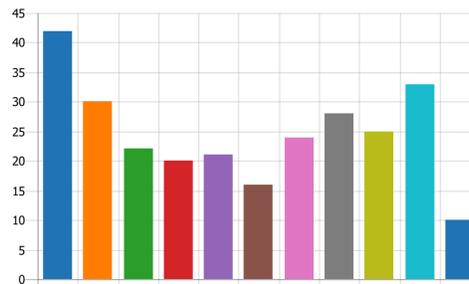
Figure 3

## Defining Extremism

In determining what should be considered extremism, there was a general consensus amongst respondents that the characteristics of an extremist position include being blinded by ideology, having an intolerance for difference, and viewing the 'other' as an enemy. For some this was conceptualised as denouncing constitutional democracy. Another lens through which extremism was defined was the impact of such a position - that is whether it was damaging to others or damaging to the individual.

There were some points of divergence in the classification of different positions as extremist or not. While half of the respondents regarded fundamentalism and dogmatism as a form of extremism, the other half rejected this, arguing that it was possible to be fundamentalist and dogmatic without being extremist. Similarly, there was some disagreement as to whether sexism and homophobia should be considered extremist. While some felt they should, others argued that sexism and homophobia are not damaging to constitutional democracy, and therefore whilst they are undesirable, they are not forms of extremism. Notably, racism, although frequently picked, was not seen as inherently extremist by a third of the respondents.

These divergences seem to reflect the distinction made between cognitive vs. behavioural extremism - that is, the distinction between extremism defined by the thoughts and ideas held (cognitive), or by action (behavioural). The majority of respondents adopted a behavioural view, that to be considered extremism involves not only holding intolerant beliefs, but also carrying out actions that undermine democratic order.

## The Role of Education

There was a general consensus amongst respondents that education has a role to play in preventing extremism. It was generally seen that within the structure of a preventive approach, education has a specific role to play. This was largely described in terms of primary prevention, focussing on the importance of socialising youth in democracy - something that was argued to be best achieved through education. A developmental approach was evident in most of the responses, arguing that addressing issues early, broadly, and educationally is the most effective. In the words of some respondents: "You shouldn't wait until someone radicalises"; "They are kids still in development, you need an educational approach".

Despite this general consensus, some teachers pushed back at this suggestion, arguing that there is so much in the work of a teacher, preventing extremism shouldn't be on their plate. Interestingly, while many in the informal education sector felt that schools should be doing more, in general policy makers argued that youth workers are more central in this work than schools. The suggestion made was that youth workers are in a better position than schools to address these issues.

It is worth noting the comment of one respondent - that they regard the prevention of radicalisation as a natural by-product of their social-educational activity, and certainly not its main goal. They suggest that this is possible precisely because the work is *not* labelled as or seen as being involved in PVE.

This position is also reflected somewhat in the notion of what is unique about an educational response. While, according to the respondents, other (non-educational) stakeholders regard the prevention of terrorist attacks and less nuisance overall as a marker of success, this is not the goal or outlook of an educational response. Rather than negating the possibility of attack, the role of education is cast as one of socialisation and identity building, which serves to prevent attraction to violent extremism, but this is

not its primary goal.  As one respondent expressed it, education needs to work around issues of radicalisation "without measuring success in the way other stakeholders do".

## The Nature of a Pedagogical Response

One of the most striking outcomes of the questionnaire was the difficulty respondents had in articulating what a pedagogical response to extremism should be.  While many could fluently describe their perspective as to what constitutes extremism, and stated that education should play a role in prevention, when it came to describing what this educational response should look like, nearly half of the respondents provided little or no response.

Of those who did provide a response, three broad categories of pedagogical response were identified: 1. Promoting critical thinking and dialogue. 2. Focusing on understanding what is behind the behaviour and words rather than the words/actions themselves 3. Ensuring young people come into contact with difference.  While one respondent brought together the first two responses, these were generally distinct perspectives.

The focus on critical thinking, dialogue, and conflict resolution mirrors much of what can be found in policy documents in which emphasis is given to providing young people with the tools and skills to be able to analyse different ideas and make an informed judgement about the beliefs they adopt. This tends towards a largely cognitive/rational response, in which the role of education in preventing extremism is to ensure young people are equipped to reject narrow/harmful ideologies.

The second category conceived of the pedagogical response to extremism as distinctly relational rather than rational.  In the words of some respondents: "you shouldn't focus too much on what they say, it is often more emotionally driven than ideologically driven", "even though their behaviour looks ideologically driven they do this to compensate for personal failure".  Another participant cautioned against taking a too verbal or rational response, that this could in fact be counter-productive.  From this perspective, much attention was given to building safe and trusting relationships with young people, listening without judging the person, and focussing on trying to understand the underlying cause of the behaviour shown or words expressed. Some described the importance of helping youth to feel that they matter. At its core this perspective located the pedagogical response in alleviating conditions that may give rise to young people embracing seemingly extremist ideas and actions as a result of underlying insecurities or frustrations.

A related line that emerged in two responses was the importance of addressing the issues of trauma, stressing the importance of creating safe spaces for young people to talk about things they have been through.

The final category of response focussed on the role of education in ensuring young people are exposed to difference and come into contact and have a chance to connect with 'the other'.  This could be seen as a

manifestation of contact theory - in which exposure to difference is suggested to ameliorate fear of, and dehumanisation of, other groups.

It is notable that while these broad-brush categories of response emerged, few of the respondents provided solid, concrete examples of what a pedagogical response would really look like.

### Support for Educators

It was striking that across the board there was the feeling that there was no lack of support available to educators.  There was a general consensus that training works and is helpful to teachers.  However, there were some caveats to this. First, the content of the training was seen to be important, and some respondents expressed a desire for training that not only provided knowledge and information, but also addressed attitude.  They expressed interest in training that would assist them with knowing how to react in different situations, not just in terms of *what* is said, but in their attitude. Second, a number of respondents expressed some dissatisfaction with specialist commercial providers of training that focus on understanding Jihad. It was expressed that these were financially costly, and that such training would be better provided by the government. Finally, some respondents raised the issue of online behaviour and the support required to address this. Respondents expressed the difficulty of monitoring and supporting the use of online environments and called for an instrument to assist in navigating this challenging area.

### Collaboration

There was a clear consensus that collaboration is very important in PVE.  Some expressed the feeling that collaboration has improved over the years as schools, regional safety offices, police, and youth work have been engaged in collaboration in this for a longer time.

There were some areas concerning collaboration that were raised for improvement.  Some called for local government to be better in recognising the value of youth work and not securitizing the work of this sector. Others sought more collaboration with sports associations and with religious providers, such as local mosques. The media was mentioned as a partner in the sense that they have an impact on young people - yet they were seen as a hard partner, they make the work of prevention more difficult.

### Implications

One of the clearest and most striking outcomes with regards to the EDURAD project from this questionnaire was the challenge in articulating a concrete notion of a pedagogical response to extremism. While the importance of education seemed undeniable to most, what this actually meant in terms of pedagogy was far less clear. The three categories of educational response, critical thinking/dialogue, relational/affective, and contact provide interesting starting points for furthering a conversation on PVE-E pedagogy.

**Short summary and analysis of findings from focus groups**

The two focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to explore in more depth the role of education in PVE and more particularly the question of collaboration between different sectors.

The focus groups brought together different practitioners and policymakers who work around different groups of youth in two different cities in the Netherlands. The nature of the conversation was therefore localised and contextualised in each setting. The aim was to explore these issues concretely rather than in the abstract.

The Nature of an Educative Response

In light of the results of the questionnaire it is interesting to note that in both focus groups the essence of an educative response involved safe and trusting relationships in which underlying issues could be addressed and strengths built upon. However, there were differences between the two groups.

In the first, youth workers articulated a clear pedagogical vision - that of participatory theatre - suggesting that by engaging with their affective life through these methods, young people were able to articulate and work through deeper emotional issues. It is notable that this was seen as a very specific way of dealing with the affect which they distinguished from efforts to deal with emotions such as recommending boxing or emotion regulation training. It hinged on the quality of the youth workers having a deep understanding of the reality of the lives of the young people and having their own 'life experience' that went beyond 'book learning'. Further, the vision of a successful outcome within this context was less about being able to regulate emotions and more about being able to channel and even take an activist position towards social injustices.

There is an important caveat to this - while the youth worker expressed the importance of young people being able to take a critical position, a youth within the focus group placed more emphasis on the ability to be flexible and compromise. In his own words: "When I look around me, this is what youth do, and what they have become very good at". However, as this was explored further in the conversation it became clear that this was a form of response that needed in the current social circumstances, but that this was not necessarily what he saw as desirable or helpful. He went on to describe that this focus on flexibility meant youth took on different personae in different settings, but that in a "free country" you should be able to "present as the person that you are".

In the second, the focus was on building a safe environment in which young people can come into contact with different stakeholders. The importance of exposing youth to difference was explicitly outlined, with creating multiple opportunities for meeting a specific strategy taken. From this perspective, within an open and safe environment, in which the talents of young people are recognised and highlighted, it becomes possible to delve into more difficult issues. As with the first, the quality of the relationship

between youth and practitioners was a forefront concern. In this second focus group however even more emphasis was given to the environment - that a condition was a loving environment - or in the words of the respondents themselves "a loving nest" into which young people can fall back when they hit a setback or make a mistake.

### Different Roles in an Educational Response

In order to stimulate discussion on the roles of different actors, respondents were asked to provide their own ending to sentences about what role each played.  As an example "A youth worker who contributes to the resilience of young people towards violent radicalisation is someone who…".

Clear consensus emerged in both groups on the role of policy makers and youth workers. The recurring theme from all respondents (including a policy maker) was that policy-makers need to have their "feet in the clay".  The qualities of policy makers in this regard were of a good understanding of the lives of young people.  In the second focus group this was given more concrete expression by one of the respondents who saw the role of policy makers as ensuring there was space for all the different voices of the city to be heard at the table.

There was also clear consensus around the characteristics of a youth worker working around questions of violent extremism. These revolved largely around the nature of the relationship they should be able to build. Key characteristics of this were the ability to stand next to the youth through whatever happens, the ability to listen without judgement, and to stimulate and support questioning of choices without judging the choices young people make.  In the words of one respondent: "the youth worker is present and is part of the life of the youth".

The role of school teachers stimulated a more diverse discussion. At the heart of the discussion was the extent to which teachers are able to create the kinds of relationships with young people that were felt to be essential to dealing with issues around violent extremism. Opinions varied with some respondents remarked that a 'teacher is always a teacher', that there is always some element of this relationship that is hierarchical and obligatory. Indeed, one respondent commented that the nature of this relationship means that it can be counter-productive rather than constructive in the life of a young person grappling with difficult issues. This was contrasted with the voluntary nature of the relationship with youth workers. Other respondents commented that they had seen some teachers being able to form such relationships, and that they are in a unique position of interacting with *all* young people, and that they spend thirty hours a week with them.  Some respondents pointed to specific characteristics that would assist teachers in working around issues of violent extremism: the ability to self-reflect on their own attitudes, ideas and topics they feel strongly about themselves, and an understanding of why young people might be attracted to radical or extreme ideas.

### Collaboration

A key theme that emerged was that collaboration can be difficult due to fear.  Fear about the topic of violent extremism could lead to over-reactions on the one hand or a hesitancy in recognising and acknowledging issues when they arise. Notably, this was the perception youth workers had of the response of teachers. In such a setting, where there is panic or fear around an issue, teachers may be quick to flag up something as worrisome, which youth workers would then find themselves dealing with, but in a calm and 'normal' way. In these instances, the relationship between schools and youth workers was seen less as collaboration around a shared vision, and more youth workers taking up and dealing with issues that schools were responding to in an unhelpful manner.

In the first setting, collaboration was also challenging as the educational vision of the youth workers tended towards promoting activism, which could hit up against the goals and vision of other stakeholders. However, it is worth noting that in the space of the focus group in which a policy maker and youth worker were sitting together, the possibility for space for different yet complementary goals and approaches by different stakeholders seemed to find some expression.

In the second setting in which there is a longer established and more formal form of collaboration between youth work, police, and schools on issues around violent extremism, it was noted that collaboration had become easier over time. Collaboration had worked most effectively in this setting when all involved "enhance one another's expertise...the more you get to know each other the more you can succeed in your goals".

## Implications

Through the two focus groups we can trace two distinct strands of thought as to what makes for an educational response to extremism. The first focussed on empowerment for activism, the second focussed on the importance of strong and loving networks in which young people's talents can find expression. However, it is notable that both give a prominent space to emotions. The two focus groups seem to show two sub-types of educational response that foregrounds the role of an affective dimension. Critical thinking was distinctly in the background of these perspectives.

## Conclusion

Confronted with politically motivated violence since the turn of the century, The Netherlands has developed five defining policy programmes on countering terrorism and tackling radicalisation. Since the third programme was launched in 2007, there was a role for education in preventing radicalisation. While the exact role of formal education has remained largely unarticulated so far, several practices were initiated in the non-formal social-educational domain. Some national and some local educational programmes were developed based on the perceived needs in the field and the insights from academic research. Although the knowledge base for de-securitised approaches was already available, political and societal pressure made it hard to develop non-securitised approaches towards youth education. This stalemate situation was solved with the twofold decision by the social affairs ministry to 1. Install an outreaching team to support schools and municipalities with their task in maintaining social stability and

2. Let them organize the distribution of the youth professional training OMEI (dealing with extreme ideals) on a wide scale.

Consistent with the results of our fieldwork, educational professionals see their role in tackling radicalisation above all in inter-professionally co-creating a warm relational environment where youth feel safe to air (frowned upon) views or (suppressed) feelings, so that these can be addressed and possibly questioned. At the same time our findings indicate a challenge in articulating a concrete notion of a pedagogical response to extremism. However, the three categories of educational response that emerged - critical thinking/dialogue, relational/affective, and contact - provide interesting starting points for furthering a conversation on PVE-E pedagogy. The two focus groups revealed two distinct strands of thought as to what makes for an educational response to extremism. The first focussed on empowerment for activism, the second focussed on the importance of strong and loving networks.

Moreover, the following pedagogical challenges and opportunities deserve further exploration:
- Professionals' incapacity to address online behaviour of youth
- Their desire to be part of a community of practitioners with a special interest in societal-educational topics

Regarding the first: youth spend between two and eight hours a day online. More specifically, marginalized youth use new interactive media for the consumption, expression, and exchange of experiences and ideas. As this takes place in a world that is generally not interested in their views (unless they predict risk), use of social media is of huge importance for the participants in the described programmes. As a result, one may expect youth professionals to have minimal awareness of this dynamic and skills to be present online in a constructive way. Unfortunately, while many professionals realize the importance of online activity, they feel that they lag behind in understanding and dealing with the online lifeworld of their youth.

The second need derives from the fact that practitioners learn more and better in communities of (peer) learners. Even in the eyes of the most motivated professionals, the training programmes should do more to stimulate discussion and support amongst teachers and youth professionals. Therefore, we see great potential in establishing communities of practice

As over the years, thousands of Dutch professionals have been made more aware of their educational role in tackling extremism, growing up and teaching has arguably become more complex than before. Radicalisation, which is presented in the abovementioned training programme *OMEI* as a wicked problem, requires professionals who are capable of attentive listening, of empathic feeling, and of not judging, not forcing, and not panicking. While these may seem personality traits that one may have or may not have, the professionals in our sample explicitly ask for more training opportunities to practice these skills and attitudes. The success of these training programmes will depend greatly on demonstrating that responding to extremism is an educational task. An educational response that, apart from the necessary cognitive information, foregrounds the affective dimension enables practitioners to navigate the highly

politically sensitive minefield of tackling extremism by staying true to their calling: helping and supporting youth to get through adolescence without too much damage and most of their ideals intact.