



Expert Interview

Jesper Holme

The role of education in preventing radicalisation

Denmark prides itself in being one of the world's safest countries. And yet, the Nordic state has produced more militant Islamic fighters per head of a population since 2012 than any other European country, aside Belgium, according to International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR).

Little wonder authorities in Denmark have felt compelled to explore new and innovative models for preventing violent extremism.

One of these is the [Aarhus model](#). Named after Denmark's second largest city and pioneered in 2007 in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings, the model has helped create trust between the authorities and the social circles in which radicals operate, helping them find a way back into society.

Fatal shootings that have since followed, including those in Copenhagen in 2015, show that the approach is by no means infallible. Experts like Jesper Holme, who is a consultant at the Aarhus Municipality – Department for Children and Young People, insist the best prevention comes through education.

Working on the 'green level'

"Our programme [a cooperation between the municipality and the police] works on what I call the 'green level' – the youngest youth level – doing work with them to build up confidence, embrace belonging and participation in schools no matter what background," he says. It builds on almost 50 years of joint efforts.

Other levels of engagement attempt to make and maintain contact with Danish fighters returning from Syria, Iraq and Somalia.

"You have to work with individuals or groups that go in the wrong direction in a different way," explains Mr. Holme. "You have to help them in the best way possible to make them aware of what they are doing. But first of all you also have to understand what is going on in their lives. Ultimately, their manifestations are expressions that reveal unsatisfied needs, and going into these needs could be a good starter."

Under the programme described by Mr. Holme, individuals such as returning fighters or radicals receive help from assigned mentors. For instance, they can

receive counselling, helping them to think about critical life decisions and often small scale help can create big steps, if the relationship is built up in the right way.

Educating teachers on style and substance

While the programme has been hailed a success, organisers are placing greater emphasis on educating teachers to have an inclusive approach. Simply telling young people about the evils of violent extremism is not enough; introducing a holistic education model fostering critical thinking skills and inculcating diversity is key.

"Preventing violent extremism ultimately comes more down to the style than substance of teaching," says Mr. Holme. "Teachers and schools should not be focused only on the substance of lessons and the curriculum being taught, like history, and maths, but how teachers are treating students daily, inviting all opinions that will allow classrooms to become breeding grounds for critical thinking linked to democratic values."

"It is all about how you deal with the people in classrooms and connect issues from politics, religion and sexuality. If you allow for this open space, then the risk of marginalisation decreases dramatically."

The task could be daunting for educators, requiring extra focus by the state and national policies altogether.

"Some teachers and pedagogues are just not prepared to invite controversial and difficult issues into the classroom," Mr. Holme concedes. "Simply because they are not educated and prepared to do so, faced by the daily challenges of teaching."

One good way to go is to initiate "mirror training" of educators, allowing teachers to reflect their own experiences and ways of thinking onto how teachers deal with critical issues in their own life.

For experts like Mr. Holme, RAN has proven pivotal. "The working groups have been inspiring in many ways," he says. "They are on a very high level, introducing a lot of evidence and experience that gives hope for the future."

"Every time I attend such working groups," Mr. Holme says, "I return to Denmark fired up with designs to add more interventions and plans to help prevent violent extremism."

In an interview, Jesper Holme, a Danish educator and expert in preventing radicalisation, offers key insight into how schools can be transformed into laboratories of democracy.

Related information

[Read RAN's Policy Paper "Transforming schools into labs for democracy: A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education"](#)

Watch RAN's video

["Holding difficult conversations in the classroom"](#)