

## EX POST PAPER

# The role of primary education in preventing radicalisation: a realistic and optimistic perspective

### Summary

On 15 and 16 November 2018 in Lisbon, a meeting was held to discuss existing practice and share ideas that promote the confidence, skills and knowledge of primary educators in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Practitioners and academics in related fields from across and beyond the EU attended, representing primary and secondary schools, government, research and civic departments. This ex post paper summarises the recommendations and good practices presented and discussed during the meeting.

This paper was prepared on behalf of the RAN Centre of Excellence by **Abigail Clay**, Director of Cosain Consulting Ltd (UK). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the RAN Centre of Excellence, The European Commission, any other institution, or RAN working group participants.

## Introduction

Over the last three years, RAN EDU meetings have concentrated on teachers and practitioners within secondary, further and higher education sectors; in a recent shift in focus, primary education is now being considered, as well. The RAN EDU collection <sup>(1)</sup> contains documents and information on the overall role of education in P/CVE. While building on this knowledge base, the meeting in Lisbon broadened the discussion, spotlighting younger children and the unique position of the primary sector in this arena. The intention was not to add to the numerous expectations already burdening teachers, but rather to provide strategies and guidance on what is achievable using the skills and knowledge currently available or easily accessible within primary education.

There are two issues in the primary education sector which are unique to the environment. The first is the ages of the children: they are, by definition, still developing into young adults, and therefore, potentially susceptible to messages (both healthy and unhealthy) as they navigate their way through to adulthood. The second issue is the parental relationship, which can be advantageous but could also pose additional challenges or barriers to the building of an inclusive, democratic and positive future.

Participants considered the unique position and responsibility of primary education in P/CVE by discussing:

- the part played by those involved in primary education and the crucial role this sector plays in equipping younger children with the necessary skills and knowledge to prevent them from being drawn into violent extremism;
- practical strategies which will empower practitioners to support children within and beyond the curriculum;
- what we can expect from primary-sector practitioners working with challenging pupils/parents or those in 'at risk' communities, with a focus on the contribution of primary educators building resilience in primary-age children.

There were three key areas of focus in the meeting:

1. to understand the basics of child development theory and its application as these relate to issues of resilience and radicalisation;
2. to introduce existing practice to this age group and to further the understanding of the environmental and contextual influences which impact children's choices;
3. to agree a framework in which practitioners can optimistically expect interventions with children of this age to be constructive and nurture well-informed individuals able to support peaceful outcomes, think critically and engage in dialogue over sensitive issues including extremism and violence.

Children enter the first formal stage of education at different ages across Member States. Therefore, for the purposes of the meeting and this paper, the emphasis is on children aged between 5 and 12. The formal educational stage (i.e. whether children had begun formal education or had moved on to the secondary stage of their education) was not an issue of concern at the meeting. Rather, the emphasis was on ascertaining whether children of this age can process the messages of safety awareness in terms of radicalisation or

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<sup>(1)</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2018, December 19). *Educating young people*. Retrieved from European Commission website: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-best-practices/ran-educating\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/ran-educating_en)

violent extremism, and if so, determining the best approaches to responsible, informed dialogue for children, to enable them to make 'safe' choices that support a positive and healthy future.

Earlier in 2018, a RAN Policy & Practice event on resilience-building for children raised in extremist environments identified one of primary education's roles as that of 'normalising' the daily experience of children raised in extreme environments. The ex post paper explains: 'Together with the parents, primary education plays a crucial role in making these children more resilient' <sup>(2)</sup>. Although the paper concentrated on children raised in extremist environments, the role of primary education in preventing radicalisation has many themes that can be related and shared.

## Child development, environmental context and influences

Meeting participants concurred that although teachers and practitioners were not obliged to develop an in-depth understanding of child psychology or child development, awareness of the key, expected, development milestones and of related challenges would help them interact appropriately with and support children. Theories of child development, including those of Bowlby <sup>(3)</sup>, Maslow <sup>(4)</sup> and Piaget <sup>(5)</sup>, were discussed, to demonstrate the benefits for teachers and practitioners of a basic understanding of child development in creating a framework within which to formulate resources and learning experiences which are age and developmentally appropriate.

It is generally agreed that when children have secure, loving and healthy formative years, they are likely to develop into adults who are confident, resilient and able to manage risk in a positive way. Children are most receptive to the ideas, values and beliefs of those closest to them — in most cases, this is their parents. Where these 'home values' are not aligned with the democratic values of the curriculum, there are opportunities to observe this difference and work to bridge the gap at school: during play, lessons and interactions with peers; and also through the relationship between the school and the home.

One of the concerns raised by teachers, in relation to the expectation that they contribute actively to P/CVE, is that young children are not able to 'cope with' sensitive issues of identity, sexuality, values and beliefs. Piaget provides a helpful description of how children organise their thinking about potentially difficult issues, and considers other people's opinions and feelings, after which critical thinking starts to develop. We can be confident that in most cases, children do not enter extremist groups with political or ideological motives, but

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<sup>(2)</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2018). *Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments — specifically child returnees*. Ex post paper, 4 July 2018. RAN Policy and Practice event. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/ran\\_policy\\_practice\\_event\\_building\\_resilience\\_among\\_young\\_children\\_raised\\_in\\_extremist\\_environments\\_-\\_specifically\\_child\\_returnees\\_warsaw\\_4\\_july\\_2018\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_policy_practice_event_building_resilience_among_young_children_raised_in_extremist_environments_-_specifically_child_returnees_warsaw_4_july_2018_en.pdf)

<sup>(3)</sup> McLeod, S. A. (2017, February 05). Attachment theory. Retrieved from Simply Psychology website: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>

<sup>(4)</sup> McLeod, S. A. (2018, May 21). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Retrieved from Simply Psychology website: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

<sup>(5)</sup> McLeod, S. A. (2018, June 06). Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Retrieved from Simply Psychology website: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html>

rather as a means of fulfilling various psychological and social needs <sup>(6)</sup>. Therefore, if we can identify where critical developmental elements are missing, we might be able to account for certain susceptibilities to becoming radicalised.

It is useful to consider the issue of resilience when introducing sensitive issues. The concept of ‘coping with manageable stress’ is considered to be ‘growth-promoting’ over time and to enable children to ‘become better able to cope with life’s obstacles and hardships, both physically and mentally’ <sup>(7)</sup>. The Centre on the Developing Child further explains how ‘programmes that actively build executive function and self-regulation skills can improve the abilities of children and adults to cope with, adapt to, and even prevent adversity in their lives’ <sup>(8)</sup>.

The context in which children grow and develop and the influences to which they are receptive during their lives is gaining significance in our understanding of how we can prepare children to be resilient and make safe choices. In the UK, the concept of **contextual safeguarding** has gained traction in the child protection arena, as a means of understanding experiences of harm outside the family unit. The approach recognises the necessity for professionals to acknowledge the relationships and influences young people are exposed to, and which could feature violence and abuse, including radicalisation.

This concept is not entirely new. The idea that a person’s development is affected by everything in their surrounding environment was espoused by Bronfenbrenner <sup>(9)</sup> in the early 1970s. The figure below (Figure 1) demonstrates the potential influences in child development and reminds us that as professionals, we should be mindful of these when working to support safe environments for dialogue, critical thinking and the opportunities to make safe choices.

### **Key messages**

1. An understanding of the key elements of child development can support teachers and practitioners with appropriate resource development and classroom approaches in P/CVE and promoting resilience.
2. Children are not merely pupils placed in the classroom to learn. Context and environment must be considered when approaching sensitive issues with children.

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<sup>(6)</sup> Bjørgero, T., & Carlsson, Y. (2005). *Early intervention with violent and racist youth groups*. NUPI paper No 677. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Retrieved from

[https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2395395/WP\\_nr677\\_05\\_Bjoergo\\_Carlsson.pdf?sequence=3](https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2395395/WP_nr677_05_Bjoergo_Carlsson.pdf?sequence=3)

<sup>(7)</sup> Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (2018). Resilience. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

<sup>(8)</sup> Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (2018). Resilience. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

<sup>(9)</sup> Learning Theories. (2017, May 15). Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Development. Retrieved from <https://www.learning-theories.com/bronfenbrenners-bioecological-model-bronfenbrenner.html>.

The Bronfenbrenner model of development, aptly described in a short film online<sup>(10)</sup>, demonstrates how complex human development is. Schools are placed within the ‘mesosystem’, and as such, have significant impact, along with the family and close community (including faith communities) on the potential for promoting positive development and consequential resilience in children.

## Approaches to preventing radicalisation in primary schools

The RAN *Manifesto for Education*<sup>(11)</sup> states: ‘All schools have the objective to provide a safe and respectful learning environment for their students. With regard to radicalisation leading to violent extremism, schools should make “prevention” work fundamental and a priority.’ The supplementary issue paper, *The role of education in preventing radicalisation*<sup>(12)</sup>, supports the manifesto with descriptions of how teachers can promote the healthy development of students as well as providing support for any students of concern: ‘Institutions of formal education are key actors in preventing radicalisation. They foster shared values and critical thinking, and help students develop basic life skills and social competencies that are essential for active citizenship’.

An awareness of the school and broader community is vital in practitioners’ work to create positive environments where children can feel safe while learning about themselves and be encouraged to promote positive values.

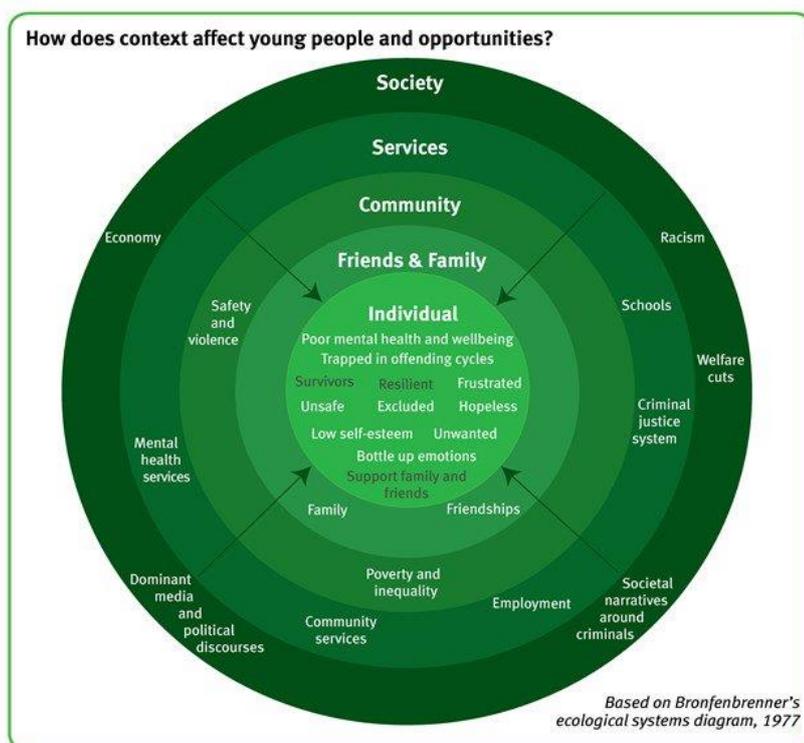


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems diagram

<sup>(10)</sup> Jankie695Corolla. (2014, March 12). *Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory*. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5htRhvm4iyI>

<sup>(11)</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, Prevent. (2015). *Manifesto for Education – Empowering educators and schools*. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/docs/manifesto-for-education-empowering-educators-and-schools\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/docs/manifesto-for-education-empowering-educators-and-schools_en.pdf)

<sup>(12)</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, Centre of Excellence. (2016). *The role of education in preventing radicalisation*. RAN Issue paper, 12 December. Amsterdam. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/role\\_education\\_preventing\\_radicalisation\\_12122016\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/role_education_preventing_radicalisation_12122016_en.pdf)

Practitioners must be aware and remain abreast of any issues or events which could affect the children, or in some way impinge on perceptions and discussions. Events related to extremism or terrorism locally or globally could greatly influence the reaction of children, either when discussing issues directly, or through the curriculum, drama or play. It may be useful to consider these different environments as being either 'in war or in peace'. When practitioners are aware of the potential impact of environmental influences, they can formulate responses in context. In cases where school communities are in a continuously challenging

### *Key messages for the role of schools*

1. Be aware of the community and any local issues which could impact on the school community.
2. Create safe spaces where challenging conversations can be held, including on issues related to extremism.
3. Create opportunities for children to explore feelings and values through safe, well-facilitated, age-appropriate activities, including drama and storytelling.
4. Develop a whole school approach to preventing radicalisation, through a clear leadership commitment to inclusion, acceptance and a democratic, peaceful learning environment.

environment, programmes to support teachers must be sensitively and carefully considered and must reflect the stark priorities teachers must balance, which may include conflict, violence and segregated communities as well as scarce resources. Such situations may be extremely fluid: for example, if just one family feels persecuted, the child personally feeling 'at war' will carry this emotion of conflict into the school environment. A broader issue may resound throughout the school, following an attack occurring locally or nationally, and may generate responses different to those observable when the school, and local and national community is generally at peace.

In cases where the school has a high percentage of newcomers, there is likely to be an awareness of the fragility of the status of the children and their families, and the approach to the entirety

of the school experience should be sensitive to this. A good example where this approach is embedded in the school is the CEDIN (13) school in the Netherlands. Here, the focus is on integration and support for asylum seekers, including those who are rejected for asylum but remain resident in the country. The school recognises the vulnerabilities and potential grievances of the children and their families, and provides education, guidance and support for the children. In this approach, it is vital that close attention be given to pupils showing potential signs of internal loyalty issues between the values promoted in school and what they hear in their family, for example, excessive silence or challenging of school mates or staff.

Another example of an embedded approach is embodied by **the Peaceful School** <sup>(14)</sup>, which strives to teach children:

- to interact with each other in a positive and caring way;
- to make decisions in a democratic manner;
- to resolve conflicts constructively;
- to take responsibility for each other and for the community;
- to be open to differences between people.

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<sup>(13)</sup> CEDIN onderwijs (2018). Nieuwkomers. Retrieved from <https://www.cedinonderwijs.nl/themas/nieuwkomers/>

<sup>(14)</sup> Christelijk basisonderwijs Klingenberg. (2018). Doelen van De Vreedzame School. Retrieved from <https://www.klingenburg.nl/vreedzame-school/doelen-van-de-vreedzame-school/>

Resilience-training can provide a cornerstone for P/CVE in younger children. When children are confident in the knowledge of who they are, what they think and believe, why they make certain choices, and are able to ask questions to enhance this understanding, they are more likely to be able to resist deceptive messaging and make informed, safe choices. The **Bounce Project** (15) has worked on such resilience-training since 2015. Bounce is a package of three training and awareness-raising tools providing a 'positive answer to the challenge of preventing violent radicalisation in an early stage. The BOUNCE tools are designed as preventive measures when, or even better, before concerns about violent radicalisation arise. They provide youngsters and their environment instruments to manage the challenges they come across'.

**Tiny Steps for Peace** (16) is a project aimed at UK Key Stage 1 students (aged between 6 and 8), based on an interactive story-telling and activity mat. Tiny Steps for Peace enhances the socio-emotional, cognitive, and behavioural skills of students, contributing significantly to schools' national curriculum learning outcomes for spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) education. Small Steps for Peace is a programme of interactive peace education for UK Key Stage 2 pupils (aged between 8 and 11). It's designed to be delivered by teachers to class-sized groups of primary-school pupils in six two-hour sessions. Learning is developed through different experiential and participatory group activities, including role-play or theatre-type activities, multimedia, and storytelling activities.

Teachers of very young children are often concerned that the children are not of an age to receive messages related to violence and extremism and to understand the complexities of conflict resolution. However, approaches such as those discussed above have demonstrated that this is not the case, and that in fact, children of this age can benefit greatly from the experience of age-appropriate, well-facilitated interventions. Curriculum resources to support these potentially sensitive issues are under development. Two curriculum support books, **Talking about Terrorism** (17) and **Radicalisation and Terrorism** (18), are objective, balanced and accessible handbooks for teachers addressing these issues with

### *Approaches for consideration*

1. Whole-school culture of democracy, peer-led decision-making, social responsibility and conflict resolution.
2. Experiential activities to explore feelings and values.
3. Focused lessons on online safety, nurturing critical thinking and human rights.
4. Teachers to model behaviours that nurture and support democracy and social responsibility.
5. Provision of simulations which promote active learning and problem-solving.
6. Promotion of 'relational competence' in teachers, which focuses on the importance of developing positive relationships in order to foster safe environments.
7. Fostering an approach of 'acceptance' rather than 'tolerance', and 'inclusion' rather than 'integration'.

(15) Federal Public Service Home Affairs. (2018). Bounce — History. Retrieved from <https://www.bounce-resilience-tools.eu/history>

(16) The Peace Foundation. (2018). Tiny Steps for Peace. Retrieved from <https://www.peace-foundation.org.uk/our-work/tiny-steps-peace/>

(17) Jamieson, A. & Flint, J. (2017). *Talking about terrorism: responding to children's questions*. Brilliant Publications. Retrieved from <https://www.brilliantpublications.co.uk/book/talking-about-terrorism-740>

(18) Jamieson, A. & Flint, J. (2015). *Radicalisation and terrorism: a teacher's handbook for addressing extremism*. Brilliant Publications. Retrieved from <https://www.brilliantpublications.co.uk/book/radicalisation-and-terrorism-588>

younger children. **SINCE 911** <sup>(19)</sup> is a UK educational charity which was set up on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, to ensure that its legacy is one that builds hope from tragedy. The downloadable lesson plans provide guidance for teachers on incorporating these issues into the main curriculum areas.

## Parental involvement

Parental involvement in the issue of preventing radicalisation and promoting democracy may seem potentially problematic for teachers, but thanks to the unique position of primary educators, this is not the case. Most primary schools encourage the regular, if not daily, interaction of parents with the school community, whether through active involvement in the classroom or through the drop-off and collection of children at the school gates. It is only in the primary sector that such regular parental involvement is expected. The opportunity to include parents of primary-age children is unique and should be considered part of the solution.

## A framework for success

Evaluating the success or otherwise of new and innovative approaches within a well-structured environment such as a school can be inherently problematic. Therefore, it is useful to work with a proven framework which can support the process of achieving a desired outcome — in this case, preventing radicalisation. The theory of change <sup>(20)</sup> provides such a framework, through a description and illustration of why a desired outcome can be expected within a defined context.

### *Key messages*

1. Invite parents to understand the ethos and approach of the school, particularly as this relates to safeguarding and promoting democracy, and open and safe dialogue and developing critical thinking.
2. Promote parent-only learning related to safe use of the internet, discussing sensitive issues and managing conflict.
3. Support teachers who must hold difficult conversations with parents.
4. Identify shared values rather than differences.

The theory 'is focused in particular on mapping out or "filling in" what has been described as the "missing middle" between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved. It does this by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then works back from these to identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place (and how these related to one another causally) for the goals to occur' <sup>(21)</sup>.

Taking into account discussions at the Lisbon meeting and the additional research and reviews of relevant RAN papers, the following framework is proposed for primary-sector teachers and practitioners wishing to contribute actively to P/CVE.

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<sup>(19)</sup> SINCE 911. (2018). SINCE 9/11: About us. Retrieved from <https://since911.com/about-us>

<sup>(20)</sup> Center for Theory of Change. (2018). What is Theory of Change?. Retrieved from <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>

<sup>(21)</sup> Center for Theory of Change. (2018). What is Theory of Change?. Retrieved from <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>

## Theory of change statement

IF  
schools  
and  
teachers

renew awareness of key child-development milestones and their application in the classroom

AND

develop relational competence;

AND

increase their awareness of their own values & beliefs, and understand how these may impact on their promotion of democracy and peaceful acceptance in their school community;

AND

understand the context of the school and the environment of each child;

AND

develop school policies which support a whole-school approach to P/CVE;

develop age- & context-appropriate resources;

have the willingness, confidence, ability & capacity to develop approaches to P/CVE;

develop a safe space for dialogue with pupils and parents

THEN

primary educators will contribute positively to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism

BECAUSE

teachers will be better equipped to apply the preferred approaches consistently and appropriately, and the children will be more resilient to the messages of violent extremism.

## Conclusion

The meeting provided an opportunity for participants to explore the specific educational environment inhabited by our youngest students. This paper draws on the comprehensive information available from the RAN collection as well as new ideas and practice from across and beyond the EU Member States. This paper explores, albeit briefly, the timeliness of interventions for P/CVE in terms of childhood development, and provides examples of approaches (both whole school and class based) with credibility and proven effectiveness in this younger age group.

The discussions held during this meeting demonstrate a commitment to promoting democracy and acceptance in the youngest children, from the start of formal education. Key challenges noted by participants include practitioners' hesitancy to raise what is perceived as a sensitive issue with such young children, and the potential impact of families resistant to such ideals. Participants also recognised that younger children straddle the two worlds of school and community unlike any other age group, and as such, any approach should be mindful of this context, and include families and the wider community, where appropriate.

This paper cites a number of examples demonstrating the positive impact of interventions; however, this is not an exhaustive list, and it would be useful to broaden good practice across Member States through the RAN collection.

The primary education sector is indeed in a unique position to provide an environment which supports the promotion of peaceful interaction, critical thinking, democracy, acceptance and social responsibility. Practitioners working within this sector can leverage this position in the immediate and wider community, to contribute to P/CVE. The core concern of primary schools, alongside implementing the formal curriculum, includes safeguarding and 'preparing youngsters to play an active part in a democratic and pluralistic society' <sup>(22)</sup>.

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<sup>(22)</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2018). *Transforming schools into labs for democracy: A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education*. RAN Policy Paper. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran\\_edu\\_transforming\\_schools\\_into\\_labs\\_for\\_democracy\\_2018\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_transforming_schools_into_labs_for_democracy_2018_en.pdf)