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Preventing Violent Extremism through Education

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Abstract
This research seeks to explore the role of educators in preventing violent extremism and encouraging deradicalization, in particular how their context informs their choice of educative approaches and the way in which they view those choices. Violent extremism continues to be a major challenge both internationally and in the US. This fall, the Department of Homeland Security declared right-wing nationalist extremism, white supremacist extremists in particular, a threat to the security and stability of our federal and state government (Homeland, 2020). This research should illuminate the way in which extremist ideologies and violence can be prevented though education.

Aim
This proposed research addresses a gap in our understanding of the role of educators, in diverse contexts, in the preventing of radicalization of individuals and participating in the deradicalization of individuals.

Problem or Issue
The Southern Poverty Law Center in their 2020 report stated that the work of preventing violent extremism is better housed under the Department of Education and Health and Human Services than the Department of Homeland Security (Janik & Hankes, 2021). Research needs to be conducted on what educative tools can be effectively implemented to prevent violent extremism, and what educative tools help deradicalize those who are already ideologically enmeshed with radical groups. Post-conflict societies have long grappled with these challenges, and international comparative education has embraced the notion of a dual face to education (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000) which demonstrates education as a driver or exacerbator of conflict as well as a potential ameliorator. Much like Bush and Saltarelli's (2000), Hughes (2020) demonstrates that curriculum can be used for indoctrination, but argues that critical theory provides guidance on how education can be used to prevent violent extremism, as it can also be used for both indoctrination and the deconstruction of hierarchies. For this reason, educators need to seriously evaluate both the explicit and hidden curriculum that is taught to students and the pedagogy employed. Teachers are actors within a system that often reproduces hierarchies, violence and prejudice; therefore, teacher agency is extremely important in not only how they implement roles in the spaces that they control, but also how the exert influence within and outside of the system (Apple, 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Without changes to education as it currently stands, the world is likely to continue to see the rise of extremist groups.

Research Findings
The research questions for this multiple embedded case study are:
1. What role does local context play in how national and international educative policies are deployed across different frameworks and designs?
2. How do educators embrace and resist their role in using educative tools to prevent extremist ideologies and deradicalization?
3. How do educators view their successes and failures in preventing extremist ideologies and deradicalization?

The conceptual framework for this research is built from an understanding of violence and violent extremism, approaches to mitigating violent extremism and the role of educators and education in preventing violent extremism.

A case study is an appropriate research method when looking closely at the context of different situations (Yin, 2012; Baxter & Jack, 2008). The unit of analysis, or subject, will be the educational programs, and the object will be the manner in which education is used as a tool to prevent violent extremism (Thomas, 2011). The cases will be bound by time as the UN called to address this in 2016, and by educational program (Yin, 2012). The goal is to gain insight and understanding of how programs have interpreted international and national plans and guidelines when developing educational curriculum and the role that educators play in that process, making it an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995). A requirement of case study research is multiple data sources (Yin, 2012); this research will use triangulation of data from different sources (document analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observations) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) semi-structured interviews, and participant observation (Billups, 2020) are appropriate methods for qualitative research. Thomas (2011) points out that analytical eclecticism is the key to case study research, so the use of multiple methods of data collection will be beneficial. This research will be theory building, it that is hopes to produce a theory of how nations and subnational actors use education as a tool to prevent violent extremism (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Cases will be studied sequentially (Thomas, 2011).

Sampling will be conducted through snowball sampling which is appropriate for controversial and potentially private topics (Creswell, 2019; Valerio et al., 2016). First, organizations will be identified that are leaders in the field including, but not limited to Learning for Justice, Facing History and Ourselves, and Black Lives Matter Curriculum. Second, appropriate representatives involved in designing and implementing anti-extremism education programs will be identified and invited to be interviewed about their work. The study will utilize a snowball sampling strategy to recruit additional participants from organizations and their networks. All participants will be adults over the age of 18. It is anticipated that up to 50 adults will be included. All invited participants who provide consent will be included in the study.

Conclusion/Discussion

While education is often a site of reproduction of social hierarchies (Apple, 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and can be a driver of conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000), there is also space for education to be a preventor of violent extremism (Hughes, 2020). Educators and educational organizational agencies must take their role in preventing violent extremism seriously in order to prevent continuing domestic violence, extremist ideologies and civil conflict from dividing our nation.

Research Implications

Implications for from this research should help guide educators, advocates, policy makers and national government in the development of evidence-based approaches to preventing violent extremism in different contexts. While curriculum is already in place in some locations, discussions of pedagogy are often not included, and should be focused on in more detail in future research studies.

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Kathlyn Elliott is a student at Drexel University's School of Education pursing a PhD in Educational Leadership. She worked in K-12 schools as a history teacher for ten years prior to beginning her doctoral program both in the US and overseas. Kathlyn's dissertation research focuses on educative approaches for preventing radical extremism. Her other research interests include global citizenship education, sustainability education, feminist mentoring, education in emergencies and teacher agency.