

Prevention of radicalization among youths with mental disorders in a schooling context

Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen^{a1}

^aAssistant professor, Department of Pedagogy, University College of Northern Denmark

Abstract

This article presents a case study from a Danish elementary school where school professionals attempted to prevent radicalization among male students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Based on qualitative interviews with school management, teachers, social educators, and a youth consultant, the study explores how radicalization concerns—ranging from Nazi symbolism and misogynistic behavior to verbal threats and extremist online activity—were addressed through relationship-building and pedagogical strategies. The article applies the theoretical perspective of community-creating didactics, which conceptualizes how feelings of community can be created in classrooms through specific didactical approaches. The analysis shows that school professionals engage in a ‘balancing act’ between acknowledging students’ intense interest in extremist worldviews and promoting pro-democratic values. However, students often perceive this engagement as monitoring, which complicates relationship-building. To counter the formation of peer communities centered on extremist statements, school professionals organize activities such as cooking, field trips, and outdoor expeditions to foster new social bonds. These strategies aim to offer alternative sources of recognition and belonging. Yet, the students’ ASD-related traits—such as impulsivity and narrow interests—pose challenges, and in some cases, exclusion and restructuring of class composition were necessary to restore social dynamics. The article concludes that community-creating didactics can be understood as a radicalization preventive approach, especially for students with mental disorders, but that its implementation entails dilemmas and requires adaptation to the specific needs and behaviors of the students.

Article History

Received Nov 7, 2025


Accepted Dec 14, 2025

Published Dec 26, 2025

Keywords: Extremism; Radicalization; Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Prevention of Radicalization; Education; Teachers; Social Educators; Community-Creating Didactics

Introduction

Education has been highlighted as one of the most crucial aspects in preventing violent extremism and radicalization (Christodoulou & Szakács, 2018, p. 90). The relationship between security and education is not new, as education has historically reduced cultural and political grievances through social mobility (Skotnes & Sjøen, 2023). However, there has

¹ Corresponding Author Contact: Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen, Email: jfl@ucn.dk; University College of Northern Denmark, Mylius Erichsens Vej 137, 9210, Aalborg SØ, Denmark; ORCID iD  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7436-4630>

been a formalization of the role of education in the prevention of extremism. Sjøen and Jore (2019) have coined this formal connection ‘the education-extremism nexus’, in which governments officially point to the education sector as one of the most important actors in preventing extremism. Examples include Denmark, where schools are legally required to prevent extremism through teaching ‘democratic values’ (Regeringen, 2016), the UK, where teachers must promote ‘British values’ (Parker et al., 2021; Winter et al., 2022), while other countries’ strategies of preventing radicalization mention the education sector as a crucial actor without specifying educational content or pedagogical methods (see, e.g., Dilimulati et al., 2024; Vallinkoski et al., 2022; Breidlid, 2021).

Besides the education sector’s role in teaching about democracy and promoting critical thinking, teachers and other frontline personnel in schools are regarded as crucial actors in preventing radicalization due to their continuous relationships with students. Professionals in schools thus have access to youths and potential awareness of their social background, general well-being, and who they socialize with. In other words, professionals in schools may likely be in a position where they will notice signs of radicalization (Grossman, 2019; Neo et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2017), and research points towards that teachers feel that they have a responsibility in safeguarding students from radicalization (Busher et al., 2017; Vallinkoski et al., 2022; Moffatt & Gerrard, 2019; Revell, 2019).

This article contributes to research on how the educational sector plays a role in preventing radicalization, but from an under-researched focus on the radicalization preventive aspects of the relationship between school professionals and students with *mental disorders*, specifically autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Recent research on the relationship between mental disorders and radicalization has argued that mental disorders may be one of many risk factors (Al-Attar, 2019; Campelo et al., 2018; Gill & Corner, 2017; Gill et al., 2021; Gøtzsche-Astrup & Lindekilde, 2019; Misiak et al., 2019; Obaidi, 2018; Sørensen et al., 2022), and that lone-actor terrorists might have a higher rate of mental disorders, including ASD (Bhui, 2018; Gill et al., 2021; Misiak et al., 2019; Prats et al., 2019; Barry-Walsh et al., 2020; Morris & Meloy 2020). Youths with mental disorders, such as ASD, have thus been a growing concern among intelligence services and frontline personnel as they are often represented in extremist groups and are especially at risk of online radicalization (CTA, 2024; CDE, 2025). Furthermore, it is not uncommon that perpetrators of terrorist attacks have been

in contact with mental health institutions prior to their attacks (see, e.g., Hansen et al., 2022; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022). Forensic psychological research on a possible relationship between features of ASD and risk of radicalization has pointed towards; intense interests that can take a destructive form in vulnerable life phases; a rich fantasy life that can, in combination with visual extremist propaganda, feed into radicalization processes; social difficulties leading to spending much time in online communities that are prone to radicalization; and a need for order and routine, which can be fulfilled through rigorous lifestyles propagated by extremist worldviews (Al-Attar, 2018, 2019; Inderberg et al., 2019; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022).

This article investigates a Danish elementary school where male students with ASD have physically and verbally, and through online activities, acted in ways that have led to concerns from school professionals, police, and the Danish intelligence service about radicalization. A recent report on the prevention of radicalization in the Danish municipalities showed that in 34% of the cases of concern about radicalization, the individuals had a known psychiatric diagnosis, and in 33% there was an assumption of a psychiatric diagnosis (CDE, 2025). Furthermore, 22% of the concerns reported about radicalization came from schools, 21% of the concerns were about individuals in the age group 10-14 years old, and 90% of the concerns reported were about boys/men (CDE, 2025). As such, the young men in this case study can be seen as representative of a wider concern about radicalization in the Danish municipalities.

Whereas existing research has often focused on the relationship between ethnic and religious minority students and teachers, this article thus examines how school professionals attempt to establish relationships with students with mental disorders as part of preventing radicalization. Furthermore, as existing research has often focused on the relationship between students and teachers, this article examines how teachers, as part of preventive measures against radicalization, have worked to strengthen relationships, social bonds, and understanding among students in the classroom and elsewhere through specific pedagogical and didactic approaches.

The purpose of this article is thus twofold; 1) to present a novel empirical case of how school professionals attempt to prevent and counter radicalization among young men with mental disorders, and 2) to introduce and apply an hitherto under-utilized theoretical

perspective in the research field, namely *community-creating didactics*, which enables us to grasp how school professionals actively work to build relationships and form communities among the students as a radicalization preventive approach.

The article is structured as follows: Firstly, it presents existing research on dilemmas related to the prevention of radicalization in schooling contexts. The article then presents the case study and the methodological approach. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical perspective of community-creating didactics, which is then applied in the following analysis of interviews with school professionals. The discussion and concluding remarks return to the article's twofold purpose.

Existing research on the dilemmas of radicalization preventive aspects of the relationship between professionals in schools and students

Preventing radicalization in education is most often associated with building resilience by promoting democratic values, human rights, and citizenship. This can be termed a ‘non-specific risk reduction’ (Sjøen & Jore, 2019). Dilemmas arise, however, when students express anti-democratic or extremist sentiments in school. In their literature review of prevention approaches in education, Sjøen and Jore (2019) found that evidence points towards that students with extremist views are often frustrated with school and feel unfairly treated, and that educators need to include students with extremist views in their educational environments; otherwise, preventive efforts can turn counterproductive. Inclusion of students with extremist views might affect the relationship between the students and school professionals. Research has referred to professionals in schools as holding a position as ‘intimates’, which makes their profession particularly important in the preventive work (Thomas et al., 2017; Grossman, 2019; Neo et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2017), and research indicate that teachers recognize their role in the prevention of radicalization (Moffatt & Gerrard, 2019; Revell, 2019). This role, however, often poses dilemmas for school professionals. *One dilemma* concerns the mentioned continuous relationship between students and professionals in school. Empirical research has shown that teachers are sometimes reluctant to report suspicions and signs of radicalization because they fear it will damage their relationship with the student and, by extension, the preventive efforts aimed at the student.

Furthermore, teachers and social educators are sometimes skeptical towards the general strategy of prevention and what consequences the students will face if they file a report, and therefore, professionals in schools will sometimes prefer more informal approaches to the preventive work (Parker et al., 2021; Summerfield, 2016; McKendrick & Finch, 2017). Conversely, *another dilemma* concerns the formal roles of teachers and social educators within the general prevention strategy. Research has shown that teachers are worried about underreporting and about having overlooked or neglected concerning behavior, resulting in actual overreporting (Busher et al., 2017; Kühle & Lindekilde, 2010; Lindekilde, 2012). This is related to a *third dilemma*: whom the attention of radicalization-prevention measures is often directed at. Research have found that teachers are often concerned that the preventive work in schools in praxis is directed at students who identify as Muslims, and that this particular group is monitored, which can lead to experiences of exclusion, othering, and stigmatization, which in turn can damage teachers' relation to the students (Parker et al., 2021; Sian, 2015; Thomas, 2016; Taylor & Soni, 2017), and that in some cases feeling potentially suspected in the education sector might push non-radicals in the direction of extremism (Jensen & Larsen, 2018; Lindekilde, 2012).

This article contributes to research on how the relationship between students and school professionals can play a role in the prevention of radicalization. However, the focus is on how teachers and social educators in classes with students with ASD try to prevent radicalization through relationships with the students, and dilemmas of relationship-building specifically pertaining to their mental disorder. Furthermore, the article contributes to the research field through its focus on how school professionals use specific community-creating didactics to strengthen relationships among students themselves as part of a radicalization-prevention measure, and on how these approaches, although not unproblematic, make sense when working with youths with mental disorders.

Methodological approach

This article builds on nine interviews conducted in the spring of 2024 as part of a study of a Danish elementary school with special classes for students with ASD called K-classes. The school had experienced verbal and physical behavior from 10 male sixth to ninth-grade

students in K-classes and common classes, which led to school professionals expressing concerns about radicalization. Online and in school, these students had expressed several different extremist worldviews, including racist, Nazi, misogynist, Islamist, far-right, and antisemitic sentiments. This includes drawing Nazi symbols on school artifacts, using Nazi symbolism in online signatures, and racially abusing an ethnic minority taxi driver during a school trip. Some of the students also had an intense interest in ongoing conflicts and wars, expressing concrete plans to join different foreign militias and expressing radical Islamist worldviews. The school also had concerns about potential school shootings following some students' behavior, including written homework assignments and a fascination with known criminals and murderers. One teacher reported a student to the school administration and social services for watching violent online videos, which led to her being threatened with a shovel by the student. The actions of the students led the school to report some of the students to the police, and the Danish intelligence service had monitored some of the students' online activities.

The empirical material consists of a focus group interview with the actors involved with the students in the case: four social educators from the K-classes, two teachers from the common classes, and one youth consultant from the municipality, who served as the school's contact to the police. All actors and the school's principal were interviewed individually during the weeks after the focus group interview. The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and followed an interview guide comprised of explorative questions about the students' radicalization processes and how the school professionals worked to prevent radicalization among students with ASD. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded (Sandberg, 2018) using Nvivo software. The transcripts of each interview were read in their entirety, allowing the professionals' experiences and narratives to stand on their own terms (Chase, 1995). The interviews were then coded to identify the central themes across the individual narratives (Sandberg, 2018, pp. 244-246). The central themes across the interviews included the school professionals' narrative accounts of attempting to build a trusting relationship with the students with ASD, doubts about professional judgment, and how the school professionals use relationship-building between themselves and the students, as well as among the students themselves, as an attempt to prevent and counter radicalization.

The interview excerpts used in the analysis are thus illustrative of narratives across the interviews with the school professionals.

Theoretical perspective

To grasp how the school professionals engaged in building relationships with the students and how they attempted to strengthen the relationship among the students themselves, the article applies an hitherto underutilized concept in the study of prevention of radicalization in education, namely the concept of *community-creating didactics* (Hansen, 2014, 2018; Mørck et al., 2023; Mørck et al., 2021). The concept stems from Scandinavian research on bullying in schools, which criticized anti-bullying activities in schools as disconnected from education and teaching, the core purpose of the school. Anti-bullying activities in schools are often placed on the social periphery of teaching, and teachers may not see them as part of their job as teachers of a specific subject (Hansen, 2022). Community-creating didactics emphasizes that teachers and other school professionals have a responsibility to create the class's community and to include those on its margins (Hansen, 2014, 2018; Mørck et al., 2023; Mørck et al., 2021). The concept conceptualizes how feelings of community can be fostered among students in classrooms through specific didactic approaches. It has a normative aim of improving the school life of those on the margins of the community of their classmates. Community-creating didactics are thus what teachers and social educators do to achieve their teaching aims through practices that include students as active participants in the learning process, making participation around a common subject what constitutes the community in the class (Hansen, 2014, 2018, 2022).

By utilizing the concept of community-creating didactics, which stems from research on bullying in school, in research on how professionals in school can act to prevent and counter radicalization, focus is directed at how teachers and other professionals in schools, through actions and didactical approaches aimed at strengthening a feeling of community and relationship among the students and between professionals and students, can prevent radicalization. Research on bullying shows that bullying is often related to a fear of being socially excluded (Søndergaard, 2009) and that bullying can be understood as a 'longing for belonging' (Hansen, 2011). Bullying can thus have a short-term benefit, as it creates a 'here-

and-now' feeling of community among the bullies (Hansen, 2022, p. 11). Research on radicalization processes also shows that what attracts some people to extremist groups is the feeling of togetherness and community, and the sense of being part of an 'in-group' (e.g., Berger, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2022; Sageman, 2004, 2008). These social aspects might be especially relevant when dealing with youths with mental disorders and lacking social skills. Theorizing on community-creating didactics as a means of preventing radicalization thus enables us to understand it as activities in school that foster feelings of community and togetherness among students around a subject or social activity, and that these activities and feelings of community might offer new perspectives and worldviews. Importantly, it is the teachers and other school professionals, such as social educators, who are responsible for relationships with students and among students themselves (Villian, 2023). Fisker (2022) has used the concept of community-creating didactics in her research on children with special needs, including children with ASD, and their connection and disconnection with school. She argued that didactical approaches can be community-creating but also have the opposite effect. She thus highlights how the activities that teachers initiate are crucial to students' opportunities to renegotiate new positions within the class community. They need to be able to form a community around *something*, and it is up to the teachers to initiate this thing. According to Fisker (2022), relationships with the adults in school are especially important for children with special needs. The adults need to know the students and work with them over time, fostering a sense of security and community. However, Fisker (2022) argued that the relationship with classmates becomes the meaningful focal point for students with special needs. Social meaningfulness is created by being with people you value and by feeling that you contribute to the activities of the community (Fisker, 2022). By utilizing the theoretical perspective of community-creating didactics in research on the prevention of radicalization in education, which has often focused on the relationship between teachers and students, the perspective on relationship-building is broadened to include how professionals in schools, through didactical approaches, can establish relationships among the students, and how these relationships can have radicalization-preventive outcomes.

The following analysis thus utilizes and develops on the concept of community-creating didactics to shed light on the radicalization preventive actions of school professionals in a school with students with ASD, and how these actions include attempts at creating

relationships between the teachers and the students, and relationships among the students themselves, and not least the dilemmas and difficulties that these strategies entail.

Teachers' and social educators' balancing act of building relationships with radicalized students with ASD

Research has emphasized how holding a position as 'intimates' makes professionals in schools particularly important in the radicalization preventive work (Thomas et al., 2017; Grossman, 2019; Neo et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2017), but also that doing radicalization preventive work through relationship-building entails dilemmas as it can lead to experiences of being monitored and feelings of stigmatization (Parker et al., 2021; Sian, 2015; Thomas, 2016; Taylor & Soni, 2017). The teachers and social educators interviewed for this study express similar experiences in their work with radicalized students with ASD. Some of the features of ASD that have been linked with vulnerability to radicalization are intense interests that can take a destructive form and a rich fantasy life, which might draw young people with ASD to online extremist propaganda (Al-Attar, 2018, 2019; Inderberg et al., 2019; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022). The teachers and social educators involved with the students explain that the students develop an intense interest in ongoing geopolitical conflicts, such as the Gaza conflict and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The students sometimes say extreme things, such as 'all Israelis must die, and all Palestinians must die,' and other times, the students express concrete plans of joining the conflicts. One student, for example, had concrete plans of joining the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company. The teachers and social educators explained that they are in a difficult position because they do not know nearly as much about the conflicts and wars that the students have developed an intense interest in and knowledge of, as exemplified by the two teachers here:

They have a knowledge [of ongoing wars and war symbols] that we do not have, and they operate on a level where it is difficult to know when it crosses the line, and when it does not cross the line.

It is very difficult to be professionally equipped because what they say is so modern. You kind of feel like 'oh my God, I am a dinosaur' because what is it exactly they are saying?

The school professionals do not know whether the students will act on their statements, whether the concern is genuine, and they are worried about not having done enough if the students were to actually do what they say they plan to do. They feel that they are not professionally equipped or able to keep up with the knowledge, language, and symbols that the students express and use in school. The school professionals express an ambivalence between, on the one hand, being legally and ethically obligated to report extremist behavior and, on the other hand, being unsure what happens to the young men when they are reported, and that this ambivalence can cause doubts about one's professional judgement:

He was 13 years old. I was actually frightened on his behalf, because I was frightened that this would become a case, a preventive case with the police, simply because we said so. I became frightened upon my judgment [...] I felt I was caught with my pants down. Because I said something, they were going to make a case of it. Who knows if my judgment is enough to make a case of it? It was as if: 'The case is there because you said something.'

The social educator from the K-class, as quoted here, felt that her knowledge about the extent of the young man's radicalization was limited. She ended up going to the school leader to have the social services wait on making an official case on the young man, as she wanted to know more about 'how much' radicalization 'was part of him':

Radicalization is not [what characterizes] all of him, so how much space would I allow it to fill in [my characterization of] his person from the knowledge I have? I wanted to work with him. Where could I place that part [radicalization]? Was it 80 percent of him, or was it five or two percent? That was what I needed to know.

In general, the interviewees express satisfaction with the cross-professional cooperation with other authorities, including social services and the police. However, the school professionals are not informed about what happens to the young men after the school files a report. This has an influence on the teachers' and social educators' feeling of responsibility to make the right judgments because they know that reporting about concerns of radicalization or extremism can have a severe impact on the future of the young men. This resembles dilemmas about the consequences of reporting found in existing research (Parker et al., 2021; Summerfield, 2016; McKendrick & Finch, 2017). The school professionals thus rely on maintaining a relationship with the students as a way to strengthen their understanding of them.

The strategy of the teachers and social educators at the school has been to genuinely take an interest and be open to what the students say, while also trying to influence the students with more pro-democratic values and opinions. One of the social educators from the K-class calls this approach 'an act of balance':

The balancing act is paper-thin because we want a relationship with him, and we only get that by taking an interest in what he stands for and who he is, but we also want to educate him to have other opinions [...] That is where the balancing act comes in [...] and we need to take care not to make him feel that something is wrong with him, because it is okay to have opinions, but it is how they are expressed that becomes a problem.

To build and maintain a relationship with the students, the teachers and social educators thus acknowledge the students and take an interest in their opinions. The interviewees find that this approach sometimes works, as the students, to varying degrees, are willing to talk openly with the teachers and social educators. They, however, also try to instill other, pro-democratic opinions in the students. This is an act of balance, as the students might then feel stigmatized for their opinions and believe that school professionals think there is something wrong with them. Existing research has found that minority students have felt monitored and stigmatized (Parker et al., 2021; Sian, 2015; Thomas, 2016; Taylor & Soni, 2017). The social educator from the K-class explained that the radicalized young men from

the K-class have had a hard time growing up due to their mental disorder, and that they are used to critical attention from adults. The openness and questions about their special interests from teachers and social educators are thus sometimes perceived as a form of monitoring or suspicion:

He knows that when we start asking questions, we are fishing for something. [...] We are dealing with a group of teenage boys who want to be in a room by themselves, who easily feel monitored.

The interviews thus show that the school professionals have had difficulties establishing a trusting relationship with the students because the students often feel that they are made suspicious because of their opinions and interests. The teachers and social educators have addressed this dilemma through activities in and out of school aimed at strengthening relationships among students.

School professionals' use of community-creating didactics to prevent and counter radicalization among students with ASD

The students' extremist opinions are not just a barrier to relationship-building with school professionals but also affect their relationships with peers at school. On the one hand, the radicalized young men found a community among themselves where they would emotionally and physically bond over extremist statements and find community in being the ones who can offend the other students and the teachers the most. The young men thus sought recognition and social status in being in opposition to the school and their peers (see also Gilliam, 2008, for a similar account of ethnic minority young men in school). One of the social educators from the K-classes explained how being reported to the social service and being in contact with the police became a symbol of status among the young men:

He went straight back to the guys and talked about it as if: 'Yeah', now he was a little closer to the criminal world, you know? 'The police came to my house, and

I'll end up in jail anyway' [...] and the other boys were just sitting there and looking at him with stars in their eyes.

Their community thus resembles what research on bullying has referred to as 'short-term benefits' as it creates a 'here-and-now' feeling of community among the bullies (Hansen, 2022, p.11). As a strategy to direct the young men towards other communities, interests, and alternative pathways to social status, the teachers and social educators involved with the students have focused on fostering community among classmates and on strengthening understanding of one another through activities outside the classroom. One of the often-expressed opinions among the radicalized young men in the school had been misogynistic views against women. An example is one of the radicalized young men, who had expressed misogynistic views and verbally assaulted a girl in his class. As a strategy to prevent and counter his actions and verbal attacks against women in the school, the teachers and social educators arranged fieldtrips for the entire class. Once every other month, the class would go on trips such as camping, going to the domestic science teachers' house to make pizza, and outdoor expeditions. Creation of community and renegotiation of social positions in the community is at the forefront of the activities and the didactical approaches performed by the school professionals:

We think of community in the domestic science class. We, for example, work with favorite dishes, so when we are making her favorite dish, you [the misogynistic young men] have to try that too, and she has to try your favorite dish. So, we constantly think about community in our activities and use anti-bullying strategies: the one you touch, you will not bully. It is not a strategy as such, but we constantly think about community, community, community.

The school professionals thus work from what can be termed a community-creating didactic approach, where the goal is to include those on the margins of the classroom community. Students with ASD can be said to be inherently on the margins, as they often struggle with social interaction. In this case, however, the community-oriented strategies work as a counter-radicalization effort, as the students with extremist ideas that often act in a

confrontational manner in the classroom are placed in a new social setting, where the aim is that they form bonds and experience the positive side of being part of a community with their classmates. This thus resembles Fisker's (2022) argument that the relationship with classmates becomes the meaningful focal point for students with special needs, such as those with ASD. Social meaningfulness, according to Fisker (2022), is created by being with people you value and by feeling that you contribute to the community's activities. The teachers' and social educators' community-creating didactics can, in this light, be seen as an attempt to make the radicalized young men realize the value in their classmates, and set aside or alter their opinions, e.g. misogyny against young women in the class, and renegotiate new positions and ideas of social status through a feeling of contribution in the community of the class (Hansen, 2014, 2018, 2022). The reason for the constant focus on creating community and feelings of togetherness among the students with ASD is that having ASD can make interacting and socializing with peers a struggle (Al-Attar, 2018, 2019; Inderberg et al., 2019; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022):

[...] We practice them in that it actually makes sense to be together with other people, because they do not have that naturally in them that this actually is something that gives you energy. They have to be taught bodily that it gives them energy. So, it is a conscious decision that we work in a community-oriented way.

Part of the radicalization preventive actions from the school professionals is thus a focus on training the radicalized young men in experiencing the benefits and value of being social with their peers, and, importantly, to form social connections around other things and topics than extremist worldviews and destructive interests in wars and conflicts. In other words, the aim is to offer a community that serves as an alternative to the 'here-and-now' feelings of community and status formed around expressing extremist sentiments. However, the interviews with the teachers and social educators involved with the young men reveal that this is a difficult task. The students' intense interests complicate the school professionals' efforts, as the students have a hard time finding something in common with their classmates. They often cannot see value in topics or activities outside their specific interests. And the times when the teachers and social educators succeed in creating communities around other

topics or activities, the culture among the radicalized young men and their way of communicating becomes an obstacle:

Even in these communities, it can escalate and become inexpedient because they are so anchored in this way of communicating with each other that this [extremist statements] is what the situation has to be about. They jump right into it [...] the impulses take over, because many of them also have ADHD, so it is limited how long they can hold their impulses back and self-regulate, and then they end up in that [extremist statements] again.

The radicalized young men have formed a community around extremist worldviews and around making extremist statements in school, this constitutes the culture of their community, and, as the social educator quoted above said, this community is also shaped by the young men's mental disorders, where a feature of ASD is the intense interest in specific topics, for the young men, extremist worldviews and destructive interests in wars and conflicts, but also that many of the radicalized young men have ADHD, which makes it difficult to hold back impulses, which in the case of these young men often entail making extremist statements towards the other students and adults. Applying the concept of community-creating didactics to the teachers' and social educators' approaches to strengthening the social bonds and community among the students enables an understanding of how a deliberate strategy of community creation and a new understanding of each other can serve as a radicalization-preventive tool. However, the interviews also reveal that this is a challenging endeavor with students who have mental disorders. The social educator quoted above explained that they dose the times that the radicalized young men engage in social activities with the other students, and that when they have a positive experience, they separate the young men from the other students again, before the impulses take over and they resort to extremist statements. The school professionals thus adapt the community-creating didactical approach to the needs and behavior of the students.

At one point, the students' actions and statements became so severe that the school professionals decided that they had to exclude the radicalized young men from the other students. For a period, the students were taught in a separate room. To slowly reintegrate the

students with extremist worldviews into the class, the teachers and social educators decided to restructure the students into two new classes to foster new social dynamics and separate the group of young men that the school professionals were concerned about regarding extremism. They felt that this was necessary but also that it was counter to the school's ideals and values:

That was what we did; we totally went against our view and perspective of children, but what were we supposed to do? There simply wasn't any other solution. Either we did that or else people would take their children out of the school [...] Among us teachers, we disagreed over whether we could justify it from an educational perspective. But that is not what is essential. It does not matter how they perform at the exams right now [...] It matters that we teach them how to be humans together.

The interviewees explain that the two new classes consisted of one class with predominantly students who underperformed academically but had social bonds with some classmates, and another class with mostly the academically brightest students. The actions and statements of the students who raised concerns about radicalization thus affected all the students in the grade, who were forced into new classes. The exclusion of the mentioned students, their later reintegration, and the formation of two new classes were, from the perspective of the school professionals, necessary actions to improve social interaction and dynamics in the class. So, even though the professionals' actions were counter to school and broader educational and societal values of inclusion, they set improving students' social lives and community as their main goal. As such, we can understand even the exclusion and later reformation of class structure as part of a community-creating didactics, where the purpose, as the quote from the teachers above says, was to teach the students how to be humans *together*. We can thus understand it as an example of school professionals moving community creation from the social periphery of teaching to the core purpose of the school.

As mentioned in the introduction, Danish schools are legally required to prevent extremism through teaching democratic values. Community-creating didactics extend this model of prevention from *learning* about democracy and citizenship to *experiencing* it through participation in community activities. This article has focused on the context of

schools. However, although not without dilemmas, as shown above, the creation of communities and the development of feelings of community could have broader implications than schools. As such, it could possibly be broadened to include how, for example, volunteers, coaches, and instructors in other activities that young people with ASD may participate in outside of school attempt to create a sense of community. This could include activities such as sports, crafts, and online pursuits. Young people with ASD may spend a lot of their time in online spaces. Community-creating didactics could thus be extended to explore how adults, whom the young people with ASD trust, can take responsibility in creating feelings of community and belonging in online spaces. How to structure such an approach lies beyond the scope of this article, but focusing on creating pro-democratic online communities for young people with ASD could be further explored, especially in light of the concerns mentioned by intelligence services and frontline personnel about the link between young people with mental disorders and risk of online radicalization (CTA, 2024; CDE, 2025; Ebbrecht & Peters, 2024).

Concluding remarks

Prevention of radicalization in a schooling context has been described as a ‘non-specific risk reduction’ (Sjøen & Jore, 2019) and focused on teaching about democracy or learning about critical thinking. *One purpose* of the article was to present a novel empirical case of how school professionals attempt to prevent and counter radicalization among young men with mental disorders. The analysis showed that the risk reduction in this case of radicalization among young men with mental disorders, on the one hand, includes attempts at instilling pro-democratic values in the students as an alternative to their extremist opinions. On the other hand, the risk reduction can also be understood as creating spaces and opportunities for the students to be together and form new communities around activities and topics introduced by the school professionals. *Another purpose* of the article was to introduce and apply the concept of community-creating didactics, which stems from research on bullying in the field of radicalization prevention. The concept directs attention to the community-creating effects of bullying, which can explain why people engage in it. Utilizing this perspective in radicalization-prevention research enables an understanding of the community formed around

engaging with and taking an interest in extremist worldviews and statements. This can be argued to be especially valuable in research on radicalization among school students, as young people often seek communities and places to ‘fit in’, and even more so, when these young people have ASD, and therefore struggle with creating relationships and being part of communities. By utilizing the concept of community-creating didactics, the focus is on the responsibility of teachers and other school professionals to foster a sense of community among students (Villian, 2023). Community-creating didactics can thus be understood as an approach to prevent radicalization, as it actively strives to include radicalized students in new communities. The hope is that these communities can be formed in a way that replaces the ‘here-and-now’ feeling of community offered by extremist worldviews and statements, before they might lead to further engagement in extremist communities, whether online or physical. As such, through the concept, we are able to grasp how the prevention of radicalization in a schooling context should be understood as part of the core purpose of the school. The concept of community-creating didactics criticizes the placement of anti-bullying activities at the periphery of the core task of teaching (Hansen, 2022) – we can argue that the same can be said of the prevention of radicalization in a schooling context. By understanding community-building as a core part of didactical approaches, radicalization prevention through feelings of community becomes part of the core task of education. It thus becomes more tangible how frontline personnel in the education sector can work with the prevention of radicalization, and also bring to awareness that when school professionals actively work with community creation, they are also doing radicalization prevention work, even if there are no concrete concerns about radicalization. The existing literature on radicalization prevention in schooling contexts has identified dilemmas regarding the relationship between students and professionals. Focusing on how teachers and social educators can foster community among students themselves might offer new perspectives on how relationship-building can help prevent radicalization in school contexts. This article presented a case study of this form of radicalization prevention among young men with mental disorders, which has seldom been the focus of existing research on the prevention of radicalization in a schooling context.

The dilemmas and difficulties associated with preventing radicalization among these students, as found in the analysis of this one school, have their limitations regarding generalizability. Recent reports on the prevention of radicalization in Danish municipalities

(CDE, 2025) suggest that this case study can be seen as representative of a wider concern about radicalization in the Danish municipalities. The article thus calls for developing operational clarity through further research on how professionals in schools with young people with mental disorders have dealt with preventing and countering radicalization. This call is warranted for at least three reasons: 1) schools and education are continuously pointed to as the most important actors in the prevention of radicalization, 2) the number of young people diagnosed with mental disorders is on the rise, and 3) the fact that security agencies and frontline personnel have expressed increasing concerns about radicalization of young people with mental disorders.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Associate Professor Henrik Madsen for valuable comments on the article, and the Research Centre In- and Exclusion in Pedagogical Praxis and the research group The Good Child- and Youth Life at UCN for general discussions of the topics in the article.

References

- Al-Attar, Z. (2018). Interviewing Terrorism Suspects and Offenders with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 17(4), 321-337.
- Al-Attar, Z. (2019). *Extremism, Radicalization & Mental Health: Handbook for Practitioners*. 2019 Handbook RAN H&SC.
- Barry-Walsh, J., James, D. V., & Mullen, P. E. (2020). Fixated Threat Assessment Centers: preventing harm and facilitating care in public figure threat cases and those thought to be at risk of lone-actor grievance-fueled violence. *CNS Spectrums*, 25(5), 630-637.
- Berger, J. M. (2018). *Extremism*. The MIT Press.
- Bhui, K. (2018). Radicalisation and mental health. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 72(1), 16-19.
- Breidlid, T. (2021). Preventing violent extremism in Kenyan schools: Talking about terrorism. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 21(7), 71-107.
- Busher, J., Choudhury, T., Thomas, P. & Harris, G. (2017). *What the Prevent duty means for schools and colleges in England: An analysis of educationalists' experiences*. Centre for Trust, Peace & Social Relations, Durham University, University of Huddersfield, Coventry University.
https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/11090509/Busher_Choudhury_Thomas_Harris_What_the_Prevent_duty_means_for_schools_and_colleges.pdf
- Campelo, N., Oppetit, A., Neau, F., Cohen, D. & Bronsard, G. (2018). Who are the European youths willing to engage in radicalisation? A multidisciplinary review of their psychological and social profiles. *European Psychiatry*, 52, 1-14.
- CDE (2025). *Status på forebyggelse af ekstremisme i de danske kommuner 2023-2024*. Center for Dokumentation og Indsats mod Ekstremisme. Udlændingestyrelsen.
<https://stopekstremisme.dk/publikationer/rapport-status-pa-kommunernes-forebyggelse-af-ekstremisme-2023-2024>
- Chase, S. E. (1995). Taking Narrative Seriously – Consequences for Method and Theory in Interview Studies. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *The Narrative Studies of Lives Volume 3: Interpreting Experience* (p. 1-26). SAGE Publications.
- Christodoulou, E. & Szakács, S. (2018). *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education: International and German Approaches*. Georg Eckert Institute.
<https://repository.gei.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/3c3bc55e-5517-4c36-b91a-67926b1d26d2/content>
-

- CTA (2024). *Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark*. PET and CTA. <https://pet.dk/-/media/mediefiler/pet/dokumenter/analyser-og-vurderinger/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark-2024.pdf>
- Dilimulati, M. D., Dhali, H. H. & Ghosh, R. (2024). Talking about violent extremism: Experiences of Canadian secondary school teachers in four metropolitan areas. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 24(40), 72-113.
- Ebbrecht, C. & Peters, R. A. (2024). Radikale digitale liv: Mekanismer i onlineradikalisering og perspektiver på forebyggelse. *Psyke & Logos*, 45(1), 143-169.
- Fisker, T. B. (2022). Det særlige og det fælles(skabende). In H. R. Hansen, T. N. Rasmussen & A. Søndberg (Eds.), *Fællesskabende didaktikker* (p. 24-38). KvaN.
- Gill, P., & Corner, E. (2017). There and Back Again: The Study of Mental Disorder and Terrorist Involvement. *American Psychologist*, 72(3), 231-241.
- Gill, P., Clemmow, C., Hetzel, F., Rottweiler, B., Salman, N., Van Der Vegt, I., Marchment, Z., Schumann, S., Zolghadriha, S., Schulten, N., Taylor, H., & Corner, E. (2021). Systematic Review of Mental Health Problems and Violent Extremism. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 32(1), 51-78.
- Gilliam, L. (2008). Bøvl og ballade: når børn obstruerer læreres projekt. In J. B. Krejsler & L. Moos (Eds.), *Klasseledelse: magtkampe i praksis. Pædagogik og politik* (p. 77-93). Dafolo.
- Grossman, M. (2019). When the 'right thing to do' feels so wrong: Australian Muslim perspectives on 'intimates' reporting to authorities about violent extremism. In J. L. Esposito & D. Iner (Eds.), *Islamophobia and radicalization* (p. 203-222). Springer.
- Gøtzsche-Astrup, O. & Lindekilde L. (2019). Either or? Reconciling Findings on Mental Health and Extremism using a Dimensional Rather than Categorical Paradigm. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 64(4), 982-988.
- Hansen, H. R. (2011). (Be)longing – Forståelse af mobning som længsel efter at høre til. *Psyke & Logos*, 11(32), 480-495.
- Hansen, H. R. (2014). *Fællesskabende didaktikker*. PPT 2014. Aarhus University.
- Hansen, H. R. (2018). Exit skole - Entré bande. *Unge Pædagoger*, 79(3), 13-21.
- Hansen, H. R. (2022). En didaktik der leder efter sin mening. In H. R. Hansen, T. N. Rasmussen & A. Søndberg (Eds.), *Fællesskabende didaktikker* (p. 9-23). KvaN.
-

- Hansen, A. S., Herschend, S. S., & Koch, T. Ø. (2022, October 24). Fields-mistænkt var inspireret af amerikansk massemander. *TV2 Nyheder*. <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/2022-10-24-fields-mistaenkt-var-inspireret-af-amerikansk-massemorder>
- Inderberg, A. M. S., Horndalsveen, K., Elvehaug, A. H., Mehmi, Y., Jørstad, I. & Bakken, T. L. (2019). Autism, intellectual disabilities and additional psychosis, and affiliation to groups with violent ideology: short communication. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities and Offending Behaviour* 10(1), 1-7.
- Jensen, S. Q., & Larsen, J. F. (2018). "Er det terrorist, de vil have? Så skal jeg give dem en terrorist": om skoleliv, andengørelseserfaringer og radikaliseringsprocesser. *Unge Pædagoger*, (3), 5-12.
- Kühle, L., & Lindekilde, L. (2010). Radicalization among Young Muslims in Aarhus. *The Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation and Department of Political Science*, 148. https://ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/radicalization_aarhus_FINAL.pdf
- Lindekilde, L. (2012). Introduction: Assessing the Effectiveness of Counter- Radicalisation Policies in Northwestern Europe. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5(3), 335-344.
- McKendrick, D. & Finch, J. O. (2017). 'Under heavy manners?': Social work, radicalisation, troubled families and non-linear war. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47(2), 308-324.
- Miller-Idriss, C. (2022). *Hate in the Homeland. The New Global Far Right*. Princeton University Press.
- Misiak, B., Samochowiec, J., Bhui, K., Schouler-Ocak, M., Demunter, H., Kuey, L., Raballo, A., Gorwood, P., Frydecka, D., & Dom, G. (2019). A systematic review on the relationship between mental health, radicalization and mass violence. *European Psychiatry*, 56(1), 51-59.
- Moffat, A. & Gerard, F. J. (2019). Securitising education: An exploration of teachers' attitudes and experiences regarding the implementation of the Prevent duty in sixth form colleges. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13(2), 197-217.
- Morris, A. & Meloy, R. J. (2020). A Preliminary Report of Psychiatric Diagnosis in a Scottish County Sample of Persons of National Security Concern. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 6(5), 1638-1645.
- Mørck, L. L., Macelly, C. & Henningsen, K. W. (2021). Fællesskabende fritidsaktiviteter som forebyggelse af marginalisering. *Tidsskrift for Socialpædagogik*, 24(2), 31-38.
-

- Mørck, L. L., Schwartz, I., Christensen, T. W. & Nissen, M. (2023). *Fællesskabende praksisser*. Frydenlund.
- Neo, L. S., Pang, J. & Chin, J. (2018). Bystander intervention to prevent radicalization. In M. Khader, L. S. Neo, J. Tan, D. D. Cheong & J. Chin (Eds) *Learning from violent extremist attacks: Behavioural sciences insights for practitioners and policymakers* (p. 175-197). World Scientific.
- Obaidi, M. (2018). *Psykologiske faktorerens betydning i dynamikken bag radikaliserings og terrorisme*. Trygfonden and CERTA.
- Parker, D., Pearce, J. M., Lindekilde, L. & Rogers, M. B. (2017). Challenges for effective counterterrorism communication: Practitioner insights and policy implications for preventing radicalization, disrupting attack planning, and mitigating terrorist attacks. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(3), 264-291.
- Parker, D., Lindekilde, L. & Gøtzsche-Astrup, O. (2021). Recognizing and responding to radicalization at the 'frontline': Assessing the capability of school teachers to recognize and respond to radicalization. *British Educational Research Journal*, 47(3), 634-653.
- Prats, M., Raymond, S., & Gasman, I. (2019). Religious Radicalization and Lone-Actor Terrorism: A Matter for Psychiatry? *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 64(4), 1253-1258.
- Regeringen (2016). *Forebyggelse og bekæmpelse af ekstremisme og radikaliserings – national handlingsplan*. Regeringen, October 2016.
<https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/sites/default/files/media/Pressemeddelelser/pdf/2016/National-handlingsplan-Forebyggelse-og-bekaempelse-af-ekstremisme-og-radikaliserings.pdf>
- Revell, L. (2019). Teacher practice and the pre-crime space: Prevent, safeguarding and teacher engagement with extremism and radicalization. *Practice*, 1(1), 21-36.
- Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding Terror Networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sageman, M. (2008). *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sandberg, S. (2018). Narrativ kriminologi – tematisk, strukturel, performative og dialogisk analyse. In M. H. Jacobsen (Ed.), *Metoder i kriminologi* (p. 233-260). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Sian, K. P. (2015). Spies, Surveillance and Stakeouts: Monitoring Muslim Moves in British State Schools. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 18(2), 183–201.
- Sjøen, M. M. & Jore, S. H. (2019). Preventing extremism through education: exploring impacts and implications of counter-radicalisation efforts. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 40(3), 269-283.
-

- Skotnes, C. E., & Sjøen, M. M. (2023). Citizenship to (counter)terrorism: The need to de-securitise the Norwegian education system and create space for democratic resilience. *International journal of social pedagogy* 12(1), 1-14.
- Summerfield, D. (2016). Mandating doctors to attend counter-terrorism workshops is medically Unethical. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 40(2), 87-88.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (2009). Mobning og social eksklusionsangst. In J. Kofoed & D. M. Søndergaard (Eds.), *Mobning: sociale processer på afveje* (p. 21-58). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Sørensen, A. E., Ruspini, A. V., Ucak, B., & Møllerhøj, J. (2022). *Radikalisering, terrorisme og psykisk sygdom*. KFR Arbejdsrapport 1/2018 – Updated January 2022.
- Taylor, L., & Soni, A. (2017). Preventing radicalisation: a systematic review of literature considering the lived experiences of the UK's Prevent strategy in educational settings. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 35(4), 241-252.
- Thomas, P. (2016). Youth, terrorism and education: Britain's Prevent programme. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35(2), 171-187.
- Thomas, P., Grossman, M., Miah, S. & Christmann, K. (2017). *Community reporting thresholds*. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats [CREST]. <https://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/33161/1/Community%20Reporting%20Thresholds%20UK%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- Vallinkoski, K., Benjamin, S. & Elliott, K. (2022). "By correcting disinformation and encouraging them towards tolerance" - Finnish educators' considerations of PVE-E. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 33, 181-220.
- Villian, H. (2023). *Bæredygtig pædagogik med fællesskabende didaktik*. Samfundslitteratur.
- Winter, C., Heath-Kelly, C., Kaleem, A. & Mills, C. (2022). A moral education? British Values, colour-blindness, and preventing terrorism. *Critical Social Policy*, 42(1), 85-106.
- Woodbury-Smith, M. R., Loftin, R., Westphal, A. & Volkmar, F. (2022). Vulnerability to Ideologically-Motivated Violence Among Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Front. Psychiatry*, 13: 1-6.

About the JD Journal for Deradicalization

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is the world's only peer reviewed periodical for the theory and practice of deradicalization with a wide international audience. Named an [“essential journal of our times”](#) (Cheryl LaGuardia, Harvard University) the JD's editorial board of expert advisors includes some of the most renowned scholars in the field of deradicalization studies, such as Prof. Dr. John G. Horgan (Georgia State University); Prof. Dr. Tore Bjørgo (Norwegian Police University College); Prof. Dr. Mark Dechesne (Leiden University); Prof. Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (American University Washington D.C.); Prof. Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang (Goucher College); Prof. Dr. Marco Lombardi, (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milano); Dr. Paul Jackson (University of Northampton); Professor Michael Freeden, (University of Nottingham); Professor Hamed El-Sa'id (Manchester Metropolitan University); Prof. Sadeq Rahimi (University of Saskatchewan, Harvard Medical School), Dr. Omar Ashour (University of Exeter), Prof. Neil Ferguson (Liverpool Hope University), Prof. Sarah Marsden (Lancaster University), Prof. Maura Conway (Dublin City University), Dr. Kurt Braddock (American University Washington D.C.), Dr. Michael J. Williams (The Science of P/CVE), Dr. Mary Beth Altier (New York University) and Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), Prof. Dr. Adrian Cherney (University of Queensland), Dr. Wesley S. McCann (RTI International), and Dr. Daren Fisher (Hampton University).

For more information please see: www.journal-derad.com

Twitter: @JD_JournalDerad

Facebook: www.facebook.com/deradicalisation

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is a proud member of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler