





# Youth Should Take Centre Stage in the Prevention of Violent Extremism

In just six months from the start of 2017, 535 terrorist attacks took place around the world, resulting in 3,635 fatalities (Woollaston, 2017).

It is evident that young people are at the forefront of violent extremism—as victims, perpetrators or targets of preventive or remedial measures. It is, therefore, perplexing—even disturbing—that when it comes to efforts to solve a problem that affects them the most, youth are still largely sidelined. Despite various youth-led initiatives on the ground to prevent violent extremism through education, they are rarely seen as key actors who deserve to be heard and given the opportunity and responsibility to spearhead efforts to solve a problem that revolves around them.

There is, therefore, an urgent need

for a genuine involvement of youth in all matters related to prevention of violent extremism through education—from consultations and capacity building to the development of youth-led resource material for the whole of society.

UNESCO MGIEP's #YouthWagingPeace (2017), an entirely youth-led guide on Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education (PVE-E), is built on the good work and uncensored voices and reflections of global youth on PVE-E, and it puts forth youth-centred actionable recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders. It is on this basis that it makes a case for inclusion; inclusion anchored on agency and equal representation instead of passive and at times disempowering participation.



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Though the literature is still inconclusive, young people are on the frontlines of violent extremism.

The main culprit of the August 2017 Charlottesville attacks, James Alex Fields Jr., was a 20-year-old man (Al Jazeera News, 2017); the May 2017 Manchester attack was perpetrated by a 22-year-old (Coyle, 2017), as was the Dhaka, Bangladesh attack in 2016 (Hammadi, Scammell, & Yuhas, 2016).

Young people are spearheading the war in the most conflicted parts of the world. "The average age of the foreign fighter in the western Balkans is 32.6 years; in contrast, the average age in France is 27 and in Belgium 23.6" (UNDP, 2015). The majority of foreign fighters travelling to join ISIS are young people. So are those involved in other violent extremist organizations such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Far-Right Movements and White Supremacists (Hart & Danner, 2017). And most of the victims of violent extremism, too, are young people.

# Context: Why PVE-E?

Violent extremism cuts across religions, race, politics and other social and economic demographics, but it has one thing in common: Violence is motivated and justified by hate. The civil war in Yemen, ISIS and the civil war in Syria, Iraq and the Levant; the rise of White Supremacy in the United States; the far-right movements in Europe; the outcry of the Palestinians; the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria; and the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Such instances, with their multifaceted causes, create fear and mistrust in societies.

To address the rise of ‘violent extremism’, its conceptual and theoretical

ambiguity notwithstanding, the world has responded with a plethora of interventions. Most of these, however, have been in the nature of ‘countering violent extremism’ or CVE. Given that CVE interventions are mainly security-based and reactive in nature, they tend to be short-lived, ineffective and unsustainable. Because they do not deal with the root causes of violent extremism, the role of education as a soft tool to shape young people’s mind has received a renewed emphasis. Today international consensus is gaining momentum on ‘preventing violent extremism through education’, or PVE-E, as a viable strategy to tackle this crisis.



# Relevant United Nations (UN) Milestones on Prevention of Violent Extremism

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## 2015



### United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250

Urged “the Member States to consider ways to give youth a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional and international levels” (UN Security Council, 2015).



### UNESCO's Executive Board Decision 197 EX/46

“Encourages the Director-General, in accordance with UNESCO’s purposes and functions, within its available regular budget and any extrabudgetary resources in coordination with the Member States: (a) to enhance UNESCO’s leading role in promoting and implementing education as an essential tool to help prevent violent extremism and promote human-rights based global citizenship education, an important area of work in UNESCO’s Medium-Term Strategy, 2014-2021 (37 C/4)” (UNESCO, 2015).

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## 2016



### United Nations (former) Secretary General's Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism

“In the Plan, the Secretary-General calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing not only essential security-based counter-terrorism measures but also systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups . The Plan is an appeal for concerted action by the international community. It provides more than 70 recommendations to Member States and the United Nations System to prevent the further spread of violent extremism” (UN, 2016).



### 2016: UNESCO's International Conference on Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education: Taking Action

UNESCO and the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (UNESCO MGIEP) organized a conference where they brought together senior education policymakers from around the world and experts in the field. The aim of the conference was to build a common understanding and vision of the required educational interventions and approaches needed to ensure that education systems contribute appropriately and effectively to the prevention of violent extremism (UNESCO, 2016).

Development of a youth-led guide on the prevention of violent extremism through education, **#YouthWagingPeace**, was one of the outputs of the youth action plan presented at “Talking Across Generations on Education” plenary session at the conference.

# Process

## Collecting and Consolidating Youth Voices

The development of the #YouthWagingPeace Guide spanned one year and was led by a team of seven authors and two project officers, all nine of them youth. The development process combined outreach to youth around the globe, desk research, drafting and rigorous review by an advisory board comprising experts such as Ms Tawakkol Karman, 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, and Mr Arno Michaelis, former Skinhead and White Supremacist.

Different methodologies were used to collect and analyze the diverse contributions from global youth. Different tools of data collection had different questions. Contributors

were asked to share their experiences and work with violent extremism and conflict, their comments on PVE strategies in their settings and globally, their personal experiences with different facets of education in general (textbooks, teachers, etc.), and how these affected them in a positive or negative way. Questions ranged from broad and conceptual to very specific.

The team also asked for what the youth thought (based on their experience with PVE and CVE) were the best and worst practices, and what they wished were different in schools, communities, families and media. Open-ended questions and interviews were tailored for specific people or organizations, depending on the nature of their work in the field.

After receiving diverse texts and responses from more than 2000 youth, several online discussions, authors' face-to-face workshops and rounds of revisions by the internal project team as well as the advisory board, the team analyzed the contributions using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). They identified key themes, concepts and repeated ideas around which to build the #YouthWagingPeace Guide. From these emerging themes and concepts, actionable ideas as well as questions for reflection were gleaned and put forward as easy-to-contextualize and easy-to-implement recommendations for education stakeholders.



Contributions from global youth were collected using various online methods, such as

**Online surveys**

**Facebook and Twitter discussions**

**Skype interviews**

**Case studies**

**Open-ended questions for essays**

## Approach

“GCED is a strategic area of UNESCO’s Education Sector programme and builds on the work of Peace and Human Rights Education. It aims to instil in learners the values, attitudes and behaviours that support responsible global citizenship: creativity, innovation, and commitment to peace, human rights and sustainable development”

(UNESCO, 2015)

UNESCO’s interventions for the prevention of violent extremism through education take inspiration from the broader theme of Global Citizenship Education (GCED).

Unless grounded in concrete, real-life concerns, however, such ideals can at times appear disconnected and simplistic. UNESCO MGIEP’s #YouthWagingPeace aims to ground these ideals in the reality of what is arguably an unjust world. It approaches PVE-E from the lived realities of global youth and endeavors to add effectiveness,

inclusivity and diversity into current efforts on PVE-E. #YouthWagingPeace approaches PVE from an honest assessment of structural inequalities that persist in the world.

Given the desire to build the Guide on and around authentic voices and experiences of young people, and considering the diversity of such voices, the team decided to use grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involved using a bottom-up approach and building it on the different contributions from young people without manipulating their responses or the trajectory of the Guide.

## ## YOUTH WAGING PEACE

#YouthWagingPeace  
tried to answer the  
following questions:



How do you encourage understanding and respect among people on the losing end of entrenched structural racism and exclusion?



How do you foster a sense of community and belonging in young people who do not identify personally or emotionally with the community into which they are born?



How do you respond to the critical thinker who correctly identifies geopolitical injustices that punish people based on nothing more than the location of their birth and the reality of their socio-economic status?



How do you encourage empathy and compassion when science tells us that white people care less about black people (Kemick (2010); McElwee & McDaniel (2017); Pew Research Centre (2016); Restructure (2010), the rich care less about the poor (Savchuk, 2014), and we all care less about groups too large for us to forge a personal connection with (Resnick, 2017)?

While sharing their voices on the key drivers of **violent extremism**, many of the youth contributors echoed the **structural inequalities** that persist in the world

“Violent extremism is not the cause but the consequence of other social problems, such as poverty, social stratification, lack of education and literacy about religion, and inaccessibility of the means for social mobility.”

Anastassiya Reshetnyak, 24,  
Kazakhstan (p. 106)

“Young people engage in violent extremism because they have nothing to live for and nothing to lose. This hopelessness leads to violence as a way to be heard and to display their frustration with the status quo.”

Carolyne Njihia, 31,  
Kenya (p. 82)

“Youth are angry at the injustice and lack of equal opportunities caused by their corrupt governments, trivial media and fake policies. Anger, if not properly controlled, leads to exclusion and atrocity. Militant groups are good at targeting and recruiting angry and disappointed youth. Resorting to violence or joining militant groups is one way of showing disapproval or rebellion and of reacting to injustice, unfortunately.”

Mohammed Qasserras, 32,  
Morocco (p. 85)

“If citizens are oppressed by poor governance systems, it makes them think about violence as a solution. Bad governments to some extent have contributed to people taking radical decisions.”

Kasirye Elly, 32,  
Uganda (pp. 84)

“Promoting peace while using weapons is a sad contradiction. Some nations having the right to impose their point of view on other nations is not fair. Latin America has suffered terrible dictatorships because of this.”

Paula Melisa Trad Malmmod, 26,  
Argentina (pp. 86)



The page numbers in parentheses refer to the pages in the Guide where these statements appear.



**...could not organize physical focus group discussions in various locations or reach the most marginalized and silenced youth**

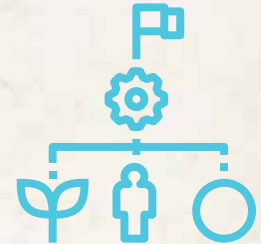
## Limitations

The Guide suffers from the following limitations



Lack of **conclusive evidence** to show that the contributions from global youth were interventions that had worked.

Because of **resource constraints**, the team had to work within the limitations of the virtual/digital space. They could not organize physical focus group discussions in various locations, nor reach the most marginalized and silenced youth whose voices deserve to be heard. Both of these would have improved the quality of contributions.



The methodology could not provide a **comprehensive structure** to harmonize the diverse and at times contradictory voices. However, this helped mirror the messiness and context-specificity of the concept and field of prevention of violent extremism through education—something that is often suffocated by the dogmatic need for a ‘convenient’, ‘holistic’, ‘all-encompassing’ but ‘simplistic’ narrative.



# Key Youth Voices

From the initial exercise of identifying the gaps within the current PVE-E interventions, through the analysis of the youth contributions, to the final publication, the following key voices were constantly reiterated either in specific sections, case studies, chapters or from the overall experience of mobilizing, analyzing and drafting the guide.



The current discourse over-emphasizes the role of poverty and unemployment in promoting violent extremism...

This is not to deny that socio-economic factors enhance vulnerability and make young people more susceptible to extremist propaganda. There is enough evidence to show that an increasing number of educated middle-class males are joining militancy. Education is often promoted as a panacea for all social ills. Based on my personal experience, I believe education is a part of the problem. Certain types of education can make people more vulnerable to extremist propaganda and violence.”

**Rafiullah Kakar, 28,**  
Pakistan (p. 107)

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## **‘Youth Washing’ is a form of ‘Othering’ towards Violent Extremism**

It is evident that young people are excluded from the major discussions about PVE-E; the phenomenon of ‘youth washing’ – or tokenistic inclusion – came out affirmatively at the top. A consequence of this is the lack of youth-centred recommendations and action points available to education stakeholders who are looking to implement proven PVE-E strategies.

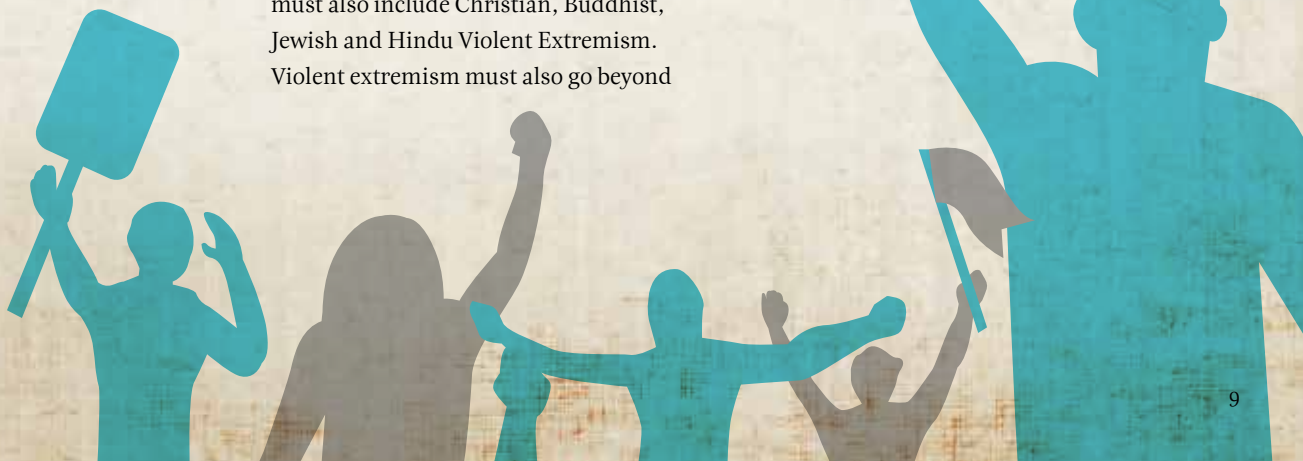
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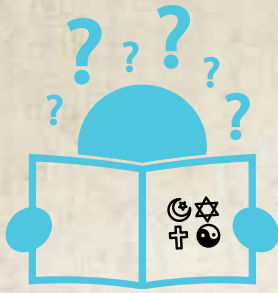
## **Violent Extremism and PVE-E interventions MUST go beyond religion, especially Islam**

All the voices and contributions, as well as the analysis, unanimously called for the identification of Violent Extremism and efforts to prevent it to go beyond Islamic Violent Extremism. For example, Religious Violent Extremism must also include Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and Hindu Violent Extremism. Violent extremism must also go beyond

religion to its non-religious forms such as Right-Wing and Left-Wing Violent Extremism, State and State-Sponsored Violent Extremism, Ethno-Nationalist Violent Extremism, among many others. This expanded approach results in a broader analysis of various drivers as well as curation of interventions that are inclusive instead of the current ones targeted only at one form or manifestation of violent extremism.

Youth washing is a form of othering





“Our textbooks systematically present a distorted portrayal of historical events and facts to reinforce a particular ideology and exclusionary national identity. A critical review of our textbooks reveal a few particularities that potentially fuel intolerant attitudes. For instance, history textbooks reinforce Islam as the primary force behind the creation of Pakistan, leaving little ideological space for religious minorities in a new homeland. Ayesha Jalal, an eminent South Asian historian, while acknowledging the religion factor, stresses equitable political representation as the leading motivation underlying Jinnah’s movement. This perspective has been completely missing from our textbooks. Similarly, political economist Dr. S. Akbar Zaidi laments how the 1965 war with India is blatantly presented as a big victory in textbooks whereas Pakistan lost terribly. Moreover, Pakistani textbooks glorify military jihad, with little or no mention of jihad al-Akbar. When violent conflict is given the cloak of religion, violence in the name of religion is perceived as a moral duty.”

**Hamza Siddiq, 28,**  
Pakistan (p. 136)

“Sports, arts and culture provide valuable opportunities to engage youth, women and communities. These can also help in the development of alternative, positive means to understand and to address the grief and tension that can contribute to support for violent extremism. Sports, arts and culture are valuable tools in discussions of differences and diversity, history, experiences and hopes of many people.”

**Elena Novotni, 27,**  
Former Yugoslav  
Republic of Macedonia (p. 193)

### **Current Education Systems can contribute to ‘Othering’**

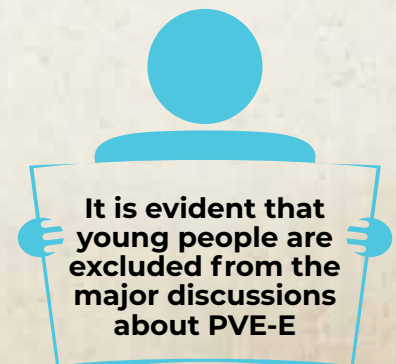
Present in several voices and contributions was a critique of the current systems of education. Exclusionary textbooks, pedagogy, school environment, teacher attitude etc., could be forms of ‘othering’ that push or pull young people towards violent extremism.

### **Non-formal Education and Experiential Learning are Key for PVE-E**

The previous finding led to the restatement of the importance of non-formal education and experiential learning as building blocks for sustainable PVE-E interventions. The playground, and the role of peers, families and religious leaders are crucial in helping experience and inculcate competencies such as empathy and tolerance, thereby influencing behaviour and building resilient communities.

### **The Whole Community Approach to PVE-E is key to success**

Many of the voices also called for a whole-of-society/community approach to prevention of violent extremism through education (the individual-society continuum). As much as it is important to target individual stakeholders, it is also important to simultaneously empower all members of the society, from parents to policymakers, and to create avenues and spaces where they could interact and work together.



“ Is there really a link between Internet and youth radicalization? I don't think so. Radicals can build their speeches away from media and computers. Most violent decisions of the planet (wars, etc.) are taken out of the collective debate on the Internet, in the domes of power away from public opinion. The most dangerous and violent situations that occur in the world arise from the offices of executives of multinationals and hegemonic governments, not from the Internet, which is an inclusive box where we can find the best and the worst of ourselves.”

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**Joan Serra Montagut,**  
Spain /Mexico (p. 283)



“ Faith leaders must work together in preventing extremism as it affects us all. We cannot allow the common enemy of humanity, the devil, to divide and conquer. When it comes to not being divided, we need to keep in mind an Arabic proverb about the three bulls. It has a famous tagline, “I was eaten the day the White Bull was eaten.” Here's the story:

There was a Red Bull, a Black Bull and a White Bull. A lion tries to attack them every so often, but the lion is unsuccessful because the three bulls are united. Until eventually the lion becomes clever and one day he speaks to the Red Bull and the Black Bull and says, “I promise to leave you alone if you let me eat the White Bull.” The Red Bull and the Black Bull agree, and the lion devours the White Bull. Then the lion gets hungry again, he goes to Black Bull, and he says, “I promise to leave you alone, just let me eat the Red Bull.” The Black Bull agrees, and the Red Bull is eaten. Then the lion comes back and is going to eat the Black Bull. So the Black Bull says to him, “I was eaten the day the White Bull was eaten.”

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**An Imam in Toronto, Canada.**

An excerpt from the case study ‘Interview with an Imam’  
(pp. 244-245)

# Key Messages

Although the team received diverse contributions advocating different and sometimes contradictory actions, three key messages emerged from the analysis of the final set of youth submissions. For

each key message, the team identified a corresponding framework to guide policy support to empower stakeholders. All the actionable recommendations (in the next section) are steps towards grounding these key messages and policy interventions:



For each key message, the team identified a corresponding framework to guide policy support to empower stakeholders.

1

## PVE-E interventions must be experiential

Peace, empathy, compassion and other important skills cannot simply be taught. These skills are fully realized only through experiential learning and lived experiences. It is far easier to provide opportunities for exchange and interaction, and create a conducive environment where young people can experience, develop and inculcate these values. A community-wide sporting event, art, cultural fairs, for example, are transformative ways of allowing the youth to experience the value of, and thereby act as advocates for, such otherwise abstract competencies.

2

## The value of small, immediate actions

Stakeholders can take immediate and important actions, even small actions, to build and support a culture that prevents violent extremism. No one needs to wait for permission or a comprehensive set of instructions. A teacher conducting a five-minute journaling or mindfulness exercise before beginning the class; drawing and building on students' experiences instead of dumping information; a teacher creating a space for discussing difficult topics; parents allocating time to listen to their child's emotional concerns; a teacher/school administrator organizing religious or historical visits once a month; a policymaker organizing a youth town hall event; a community-wide sporting, cultural or art event—these are examples of immediate actions that stakeholders could implement easily and with minimal resources.

3

## The need for patience, persistence and endurance

Prevention of violent extremism is a long and slow process. It requires the development of a resilient culture. It is the work of expanding opportunity. All stakeholders (especially those in education—teachers, school administrators, families, religious leaders and policy makers) can play critical roles in making this culture a reality with genuine long-term commitment.

# Recommended Actions

In this section, for ease and accessibility, the critical recommendations for actions are presented for each of the key stakeholders—teachers, school administrators, parents and guardians, religious leaders and policymakers. Please refer to **#YouthWagingPeace: Action Guidelines for Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education** (now available in English, French and Arabic) for a detailed rendering of the action guidelines..

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## Policymakers

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### **Empower and encourage community stakeholders to implement whole-of-community activities towards building resilient communities**

- » By providing them with **technical and financial assistance** to plan and execute activities such as family-students collaborative assignments, art and cultural fairs, sports tournaments, interfaith exchanges
- » By investing in **research and development** of resources and materials, in-service training and mentorship programs to equip teachers and school administrators with the latest techniques, methods and skills to ensure the implementation of challenging school and classroom activities. For example, introducing controversial and challenging topics to students, managing diverse classrooms and helping students from stigmatized communities integrate successfully
- » By hosting **youth-only town hall** events to nurture active citizenship.

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## Family and Guardians

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### **Focus on the holistic growth and development of your child**

- » By paying attention to the content of your **child's school experience**, not only academic performance but their relations with peers and members of the school community
- » By showing your child consistent nonviolent and understanding behavior in your interaction with others—young people need **structure and role models**
- » By **validating your child's feelings** and the willingness to share your own fears and vulnerabilities.

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## Teachers

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### Discuss controversial and difficult topics

- » By providing students with safe spaces (online and offline) to identify and articulate their own understanding of words and concepts such as extremism, violence, moderation
- » By discussing situations where violence might be justified, for example, self-defence (when one's own personal safety or the safety of a loved one, or for that matter any individual, is at risk.)
- » By having students analyze historical cases in which violent and non-violent means were used to achieve outcomes.



### Promote student-centred learning

- » By drawing out what students already know or believe in when introducing new topics
- » By creating surveys to circulate among students on a regular basis to learn more about their successes and struggles (personal as well as academic)
- » By delegating to students classroom chores or tasks, for example, handing out assignments, and encouraging peer-to-peer learning.



### Use art to nurture empathy and compassion

- » By encouraging students to create small art clubs to express themselves and their imaginings of the experiences, challenges and opportunities of someone in a context very different from their own
- » By asking students to keep a journal and dedicate at least five minutes each day to journaling.



### Develop an understanding of structural barriers and injustice

- » Through role plays, encourage students to develop empathy for people from a different circumstance. For example, introducing (and assigning them) to a cast of imaginary characters who have been born into a variety of circumstance; from a sick child born into poverty to a healthy child born to wealthy parents etc., and let their classroom participation for the rest of class be determined by the identity/character assigned to them
- » As a class or small group, focus on a structural injustice (for example; inequality, gender discrimination, racism etc.) or barrier and have a dialogue around it.

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## School Administrators

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### School inclusion for marginalized or disadvantaged youth

- » By including open activities in the school schedule for all young people in the community. For example, after-school programs or open day events to which non-students are invited, as well as making school facilities such as gym and auditorium open for non-students
  - » By encouraging students to be outreach ambassadors for young people who do not participate in the regular school day.
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### Nurture active citizenship

- » By inviting guest speakers to speak to students about their role in the wider community. The speakers could be family members, religious and community leaders, or experts in different fields
- » By providing extra credit, grade weighting or other formalized incentives to students to volunteer.



## Religious leaders



### Enhance Religious Literacy in the community

- » By discussing **common misconceptions, contradictions and historical relevance** with the congregation and members of the school and religious community
- » By encouraging young people to appreciate the **universal values upheld by different religions** as well as ask questions about their religion and their religious texts without feeling that they are disrespecting the belief
- » By ensuring that school libraries are stocked with sufficient literature and other learning resources that present **alternative interpretations and narratives** of those religious texts and concepts that are misused or abused by recruiting extremists





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### Youth Led Guide on Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education

<http://bit.ly/2AWV2xp>



### Résumé Des Pistes D'action Pour Prévenir L'extrémisme Violent Par L'éducation

<https://bit.ly/2r7m1QS>



### Action Guidelines for Prevention of Violent Extremism

<http://bit.ly/2Bc0sEN>



### Youth Waging Peace

<https://bit.ly/2CPIZme>



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



• Mahatma Gandhi Institute  
• of Education for Peace  
• and Sustainable Development

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