

RAN Y&E

CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Youth & Education**22-23 November 2022, Stockholm, Sweden*

Artistic methods in prevention work

Key outcomes

In the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), various approaches and methods exist to strengthen protective factors in the lives of young people and to ensure their positive development and resilience towards influences of extremist ideas and recruitment. Leisure activities, like sports, are often used in youth work activities and schools. We explored these sports methods during a RAN Youth & Education (Y&E) meeting in 2021, where we learned about the opportunities for fostering positive identities, social cohesion and citizenship ⁽¹⁾. To follow up on this meeting, we aimed to expand our focus to interventions that use arts to enhance protective factors and resilience. Forum theatre, music and (visual) storytelling are some of the many art forms being deployed in activities with young people, and which bear the potential to foster self-expression, talent development or intercultural dialogue, all important elements of positive identity development in young people.

On 22 and 23 November 2022 the RAN Y&E Working Group organised a meeting in Stockholm and convened frontline practitioners from all around Europe to share their experiences, insights and challenges regarding their arts-related activities in youth work and education. This was an explorative meeting to identify the different approaches, goals and outcomes of this kind of method. The key outcomes were the following:

- Arts can provide an opportunity to build bridges between people. It is a way of telling stories and expressing feelings. When an audience experiences a performance, hears a song or sees a painting, they get a unique insight into the mind of the (other) creator. This can create a better mutual understanding.
- People need to express themselves and share what they feel and experience. Arts offer a way to do this in a creative manner. Those who usually do not get or feel heard can amplify their voice in society through arts.
- In an art project, the focus is obviously often on the creative outcome. If embedded in prevention work, however, it is essential for practitioners to mainly focus on reflection during and after the creative process. They should engage with the young person about the message they want to get across.

⁽¹⁾ [RAN Y&E Inclusion through sports, online meeting 30 November – 01 December 2021 \(europa.eu\)](#)

Highlights of the discussion on why and how to use artistic methods in prevention work

1. How can artistic methods contribute to PVE?

Arts can play a positive and constructive role in the lives of young people. Arts are a unique way for people to express themselves, develop their talents and connect with others. Interventions for various target groups make use of different art forms, drama therapy, for example, or art performances to spread awareness on issues that need to be addressed. This use of arts in prevention work is perceived as very useful by those who work with it. Participants described the beneficial contributions arts could make in PVE:

- Giving young people the opportunity to **express feelings, underlying needs and sensitive affairs in an indirect way**. Radicalisation happens when people face grievances, confusion, isolation, a lack of belonging, pain, inequality, etc. These are painful and abstract things, and art is a very useful tool to address these issues. This makes discussing sensitive topics and feelings easier and less scary, which is especially important for young people.
- Allowing young people to address complex issues directly by **putting things into words** through verbal art forms like poetry, theatre or poetry and learning how to deal with their anger in a non-hateful way.
- Providing young people with ways **to get their messages across**, which people might not listen to without arts. Young people get the possibility to **address basic and more complex needs**.
- **Fostering the development of empathy**, putting oneself in another's place and by doing so creating understanding of other perspectives, experiences and opinions. It can help to enhance mutual understanding and getting where the 'other' is coming from.
- **Engaging the least heard**. Sometimes the most outspoken people can overshadow others. Using arts can trigger young people in a different way, which could result in others expressing themselves.
- Art can engage youngsters because it is **fun** and can be a **conversation starter**. Art can reach different groups and be a humanising language because it relates to emotions and needs everybody has.

2. Risks and protective factors to focus on in PVE through art

There are various risks and protective factors that can push young people towards extremism, or prevent them from it. Artistic methods can tackle specific risk factors and foster several protective factors. One of our panels discussed and explored these factors and came to the following conclusions:

- Arts performances can present **counternarratives** to an audience. These alternative narratives can stimulate young people to think critically and reflect on their own premises and dogmas.
- Learning about the personal stories of other people through arts can create mutual **understanding** and empathy.
- Growing up with a bicultural background or in a multicultural context might lead to doubts about one's own identity. Arts and culture can give young people an opportunity to positively connect with their **cultural identity**, instead of with malevolent actors trying to influence this search.

3. What elements should an art project include to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism?

The participants of this meeting also discussed and explored the conditions that an arts project should fulfil in order to successfully work for early-stage prevention:

- **Building bridges between people should be an integral aspect of the project.** As a practitioner, the focus cannot only be on the creative process without engaging with the young persons about the personal meaning and message they want to get across. Moreover, actively connecting with the audience is also an important way to create this understanding, after storytelling performances ⁽²⁾ or theatre plays ⁽³⁾ for example.
- Like every project with young people, there should be a **safe and coordinated atmosphere** where participants feel free to express themselves. This is especially important for arts projects due to the personal vulnerability in the creative process. To keep the young people involved, make it a shared project to ensure the youngsters really feel ownership.
- Participation in these projects should be **voluntary**. Youngsters should not be forced to create during the activity. Allow them to just watch, listen and develop curiosity at their own pace.
- Young people might experience a barrier to joining an activity to express themselves, especially if they are not experienced with arts yet. Do not be afraid to just go to the place where the young people are. **Surround the young people with arts, and normalise and facilitate it.** This makes it more accessible for the young people, as has been the case at La Petite Soeur ⁽⁴⁾.
- Those organising the project should be **fully aware of the purpose, goals and benefits of the activity**, in order to consciously act and support the young people during the process, and maximise the positive outcome. Teachers and school staff, for example, should feel ready to implement such a project to make it work.

Exemplary art forms

- **Resilience building in theatre**

The 'a step removed' principle relates to how theatre allows people to be one step removed from reality. In this space they are able to practice their behaviour, without real-life consequences. It can be seen as a rehearsal for reality, where young people can practice difficult conversations, practice non-violent communication and learn how to deal with situations that make them emotional. People can practice until they feel ready to do something in real life. Also, theatre allows the participants to formulate a message they want to get across. They can channel their anger from personal experiences while acting to foster the social change they need.

- **Self-expression through hip-hop**

Rap music was also presented as a powerful art form. In the lyrics, people can express ideas and share experiences. They can develop their talents and carve out their voice and role in society. Also, the hip-hop culture represents values of inclusion, justice and solidarity, as well as the principle of 'each one teach one', which stands for the power of knowledge sharing.

⁽²⁾ See Inspiring Practices: Contact

⁽³⁾ See Inspiring Practices: 2DO & Odd Arts

⁽⁴⁾ See Inspiring Practices: La Petite Soeur

By facilitating recording opportunities or organising a rap contest for young people, first-line practitioners can engage with them and discuss their lyrics, their messages and their lives. After all, besides toughness, rap music can also be focused on honesty and vulnerability. Moreover, practitioners can act upon it when young people talk about violence in their music by asking questions and find the reasons behind it. By working from the culture young people live in, they are more likely to open up.

- **Storytelling**

Storytelling also has various benefits, whether through theatre, moviemaking or creative writing. Facilitating this for young people acknowledges that their issues are important and worth sharing. The audience can then learn the experiences of the teller and understand what they go through. People can get together around a project and create bonds in and across communities. The audience can recognise the personal social, psychological or material grievances, which can make them more inclined to seek help when needed. Moreover, in creative writing, storytelling can be used to make young people imagine alternative futures for themselves and show them that they have agency in their life.

Recommendations for youth work and schools

Throughout this meeting, the participants focused on three overarching questions to formulate concrete recommendations regarding the implementation of arts projects in prevention work.

How can you include art in your daily practice as a youth worker or teacher?

Practitioners might have the ambition to integrate arts in their daily work but do not always know where to start and face barriers in terms of network, time, resources or approval.

- In schools, try to also work together with teachers of courses other than arts. They have to be convinced that artistic methods can have a positive effect on young people.
- Try to connect with other artists or institutions in the local creative sector. Collaborate with museums that are close to your school, for example. Relate the project to a social topic that is important for the particular area or context.
- It is often still difficult to get permission as a teacher. Principals can have the power within the school to make it easier for teachers to reach out to arts projects, so seek their support and let them think along.
- Offer trainings to teachers and youth workers to make the benefits of artistic methods clear. Art projects need participants, while schools are often in search of more art and creativity in their curricula.

How can you develop local partnerships with arts projects in your neighbourhood as a practitioner in education, or vice versa?

This question on local partnerships was at the centre of various RAN Y&E meetings in 2021 and 2022. Please consult the papers in the 'Further reading' section for more information.

- Make sure you have a supportive local network of organisations and role models, and work together with people who can build bridges between institutions.
- Make yourself known by being visible, projects can give out free tickets for a show, for example.

- As a project, understand what the school or organisation's ethos is; make it easy for the school to understand why arts are useful. Pick the words in how you describe your project to fit with the requirements of the school and government. Make sure your project is consistent with the values of the school.
- Be aware that not all artists will just do anything for free, so offer them a fair compensation.
- Take time to build trust and have an open dialogue about your own work and about how the other potential local partners work.

How can you show your results to maintain support from (institutional) funders?

Positive effects of primary prevention are always rather difficult to provide to funders. The effects are barely measurable, which makes it difficult to get support from institutions that mostly want to see numbers. The participants stated that it is in most cases impossible to make results measurable in a numeric way, and thus advice the following:

- Make the positive effect on the participants visible. Arts provide a concrete output product, which makes it feasible to disseminate. Make those in charge of funding attend your showcases or workshops, and let them experience that the participants are leaving happy. Use testimonies of the youngsters who have engaged successfully.
- Be the solution to long-term action plans of the (local) government; try to formulate how your project is an answer to their needs.

Inspiring practices

- **GO! Royal Atheneum of Antwerp, Belgium**

In the [Athena Syntax](#) education programme, the school works together with artists and institutions to help students explore their cultural identities through visual arts. These artworks are a starting point for exchange about heritage and facilitate intercultural dialogue.

- **Fryshuset, Sweden**

[Fryshuset](#) organises various empowerment activities for young people, aimed at social inclusion and better futures. Their theatre performances around the country address destructive subcultures such as extremist groups and gangs, based on true stories.

- **Odd Arts, United Kingdom**

[Odd Arts](#) delivers workshops for youth-led theatre performances and other creative campaigns, exploring topics of different kinds of extremism. They work in different settings with schools and communities, but also prisons.

- **Graffiti vzw, Belgium**

The project '[Zwerfkeet](#)' is a mobile music studio that travels from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and goes to places where the young people are. They give young people the chance to tell their personal stories in a rap song and record it, and they challenge the youngsters to be vulnerable in their lyrics.

- **ADAMAS, the Netherlands**

[ADAMAS](#) is a network of youth workers, criminologists and psychologists who have similar backgrounds as the young people they work with. They give the opportunity to at-risk youth who want to express themselves in music. They accompany the youngsters to the studio and together reflect on the lyrics and their message.

- **La Petite Soeur, France**

[La Petite Soeur](#) creates spaces where young people and other citizens can connect through various cultural and artistic projects. In one of their projects they occupy a space in a juvenile centre, where they let local artists use it as an atelier. The artists just work there, and the young people are free to come in, watch and join. The organisation facilitates access to and participation in arts, so the young people can discover themselves beyond the label of being a delinquent.

- **Mareena, Slovakia**

[Mareena](#) provides creative activities for young people (mostly from Ukraine) in refugee centres, who lack access to such activities. In doing this, the organisation also addresses the psychological needs of these children, who are often traumatised.

- **Humans First, Greece**

[Humans first](#) develops counternarrative campaigns through the use of short movies, made by young people from the target group. The aim is to raise awareness about the radicalisation process and create understanding among the audience in order to decrease discrimination.

- **C:ntact, Denmark**

[C:ntact](#) aims to empower young people by giving them the opportunity to make their voice heard by an audience. Moreover, they let storytellers visit schools and youth work organisations to share their personal radicalisation stories while engaging the audience.

- **2DO, the Netherlands**

In the 2DO project, through participative drama they challenge the audience or participants of the workshop to open up and discuss about challenges young people deal with. Participants come up with the topics themselves and learn how to express themselves when they are faced with injustice and other issues.

Follow-up and remaining questions

Throughout this exploratory meeting, several suggestions and questions were raised that can function as takeaways or food for thought for following meetings on this topic (e.g. the meeting of the RAN LOCAL Working Group in 2023 on the topic *How can arts, the city's civic pride, and culture contribute to boosting local resilience and democracy against extremism, hate crime, and other threats to democracy?*).

- To engage isolated youth, connecting with parents or peers can work because they are the **direct environment** of young people. The whole context of young people is important, because either a trusted teacher, friend, youth worker, brother or mother can direct the person who needs it to a relevant art project. Art projects could also be a means to get these parents, teachers and youth workers to meet, as they also have the need to meet and exchange.
- There is more **scientific evidence** needed about the benefits of arts, as measurable evidence is still often essential for funders. Also for practitioners it would be useful to know what has been proved to work best and what to take into account.

- The goal is to reach and engage those youngsters who need these interventions the most. However, this can introduce **dilemmas about safety**. One example is with engaging formers, or those who are still with one foot connected to gangs or extremist groups. They can be key contacts to contact other beneficiaries and it is important to empower them and get them to disengage. However, in the meantime, we must ensure that they do not harm other individuals (or society) in the process. This poses a difficult challenge in this field of P/CVE, but also in others like prison or rehabilitation. Some practitioners opted to not engage with such youngsters, while others insisted to give these these people a chance after all.
- Arts are all about creative expression. However, this expression might promote and **trigger violence**, as some cases of 'drill rap' for example. In a part of this specific music genre and accompanying subculture, there are often being taken shots at other artists. This has in various countries led to several sad fatal incidents with very young victims. Practitioners have to facilitate the creative process, but they should be able to channel what comes out of 'the box of Pandora' and keep it constructive. This is a question of safety but also of morality and freedom of expression. In any case, it is important that the practitioner understands the subculture this comes from.

Further reading

- National Youth Network (2000). [Arts and Performances for Prevention](#)
- The Arts Council (2016). [Arts and cultural participation among children and young people – Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study](#)
- RAN Youth & Education (2021). [Education and youth work: towards an effective collaboration](#)
- RAN Youth & Education (2022). [Inclusion through sports](#)