CONCLUSION PAPER
*RAN event - **Dealing with the co-existence of formal and non-formal education***
4 and 5 November 2020, digital meeting

Dealing with the Co-existence of Formal and Non-formal Education

Key outcomes

This RAN Youth & Education and RAN LOCAL meeting explored the topic of when non-formal education becomes problematic in co-existence with formal education for teachers and for local authorities. One of the main outcomes of the meeting is that youngsters/pupils benefit from a positive pedagogical environment in which the stakeholders (schools, parents, non-formal schooling and local authorities) work jointly. Including non-formal education can be of added value (e.g. in terms of identity-building) as long they are not interfering with societal values, or are conflicting with formal education. However, building up this relationship and trust takes time. Should the non-formal school promote undemocratic and undesirable values, cooperation is less feasible. Monitoring the situation is important in that case if pupils are engaging in this environment. Examples of how this cooperation and monitoring can take place have been presented and will be explained in this conclusion paper.

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This paper will first address what the value of non-formal education (¹) can be for young people, their community and ultimately society. It explores when non-formal education becomes problematic and how this is encountered in several EU countries. After challenges with regard to the topic have been discussed, recommendations are given for both authorities and formal education (²) and non-formal education. This includes recommendations on preventing non-formal education from becoming problematic in the first place, and recommendations on how to deal with it in case problems have arisen.

Highlights of the discussion

Value of non-formal education

Non-formal schooling can serve as a protective factor and contribute to community and identity building. It can add value to a personal life and spark cultural and religious development. For example, it can offer additional tutoring that could not be afforded otherwise and spark a sense of self(-esteem), sense of identity and sense of belonging. Non-formal schooling can therefore have beneficial outcomes, also in terms of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Facilitation and accommodation by local governments can be considered if the providing party is trusted/trustworthy.

> **Examples of valuable non-formal education:**
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> ➢ Especially older youngsters (18+ years old) gain interest in religion. To make sure they do not fall into a gap and seek answers to religious or identity questions and alienate from society, non-formal schooling can step into this. One example is by providing lessons to older youngsters on how to interpret religious books/ideas in the context of the modern west.
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> ➢ A scouting movement for youngsters in **Belgium** that is now being run by madrasas. Youngsters learn about the Quran in the morning, and in the afternoon do voluntary work for the community (e.g. bags for old people/cleaning the streets). In this way, religious teaching is made contextual to the 21st century, which is deemed very valuable.
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> ➢ In **Ireland**, NGOs have been involved in sports and anti-racism: Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI) and Show Racism the Red Card; they work with students after school and at weekends. The model is transparent and usually there is a teacher from the school involved.

Can non-formal schooling be problematic?

Non-formal schooling becomes problematic if a gap exists or arises with formal schools regarding content, didactics and values. For example, when a non-formal school teaches anti-democratic values this can lead to the underdevelopment of critical thinking skills and absence of a democratic attitude. It also poses a problem when the rights of children (to have free time, time to play) are severely diminished or even harmed (abuse) and/or the school does something illegal. Didactics can be low: teachers who lack pedagogical skills or little or no differentiation in engagements towards age groups that attend the education facility.

An example of a problematic non-formal school includes one where a Salafi mosque was not registered as a non-formal school. When local authorities controlled the school on safety grounds and educational grounds, many irregularities were noticed. Children also attended the school during formal schooling hours, the school

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(¹) For this meeting we used this working definition: Any institutionalised, organised form of learning that is outside of the formal system. During this meeting we will focus on certain types of ideological non-formal education, because these might pose a problem for formal education and local authorities. They support ideologies that might conflict with fundamental democratic values and school ethos.
(²) Formal education is here defined as: State-run, organised education within a particular national structure, delivered by (national) authorities, certified and officially recognised. Source: RAN Discussion paper - 'The co-existence of formal and non-formal education', 4-5 November 2020.

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included a totally equipped gym, and phrases on the wall indicated that children between the age of 5 and 6 were taught about the societal difference between "good" and "bad" people.

A lack of visibility and accessibility complicates the matter. Examples are when there is no contact or collaboration between local authorities and non-formal schools, when there is cultural distance and when mutual distrust grows. Under these particular conditions, non-formal schooling can become a breeding ground for radicalisation. For example, violent right-wing extremists and members of Salafi communities are increasingly promoting home education. This offers the parents the opportunity to influence children with harmful ideologies.

In some cases, collaboration between local authorities and formal schools and non-formal schools is not possible.

An example of non-successful collaboration was given by a participant from the educational field. The participant noticed that children who attended the local mosque were taught undemocratic values. Whereas children of the school first peacefully participated in all kinds of religious celebrations, it is now taught to the children that celebrating 'others' religious celebrations (such as Christmas) contradicts with Islam and therefore should be stopped. When the director of the school wanted to discuss this with the imam of the mosque, he was not taken seriously and no constructive dialogue was possible. He contacted the local authorities, which also found the case very problematic but also had no clear guidance on how to act or follow up on this matter.

Is the problem recognised?

There is a huge variation when it comes to the presence of non-formal education and the challenges imposed. It was noticed that there are non-formal schools that are out of reach and/or have of a lack of pedagogical quality. In some cases, anti-democratic ideas are promoted, and in some situations the mental health of children is at stake. Furthermore, the levels of inspection and monitoring of these schools differ due to legal restrictions or policy reasons.

In **France**, controlling home schooling and monitoring non-formal education is particularly challenging. Education institutions without a contract complying to the state system cannot be monitored. Also there are legal and organisational obstacles to creating a database of pupils who attend non-formal schooling. This is arranged differently in **Finland** where all private schools must follow the national curriculum. They may have some additional tasks — e.g. stressing Christianity or other religion, special emphasis on arts or sports — but the basic curriculum is the same. In **Belgium**, there are mosques that are recognised by the government and mosques that are not. In the **United Kingdom** (UK), non-formal schooling is a widespread parallel education system. There are currently around 3 000 madrasas that teach youngsters below the age of 18. Nearly 90 % of Muslims send their children to some form of religious education. Part of the reason for this growth is the fact that the mosques in the **UK** couldn't keep up with the increasing request for education, and because madrasas can be financially lucrative for the organisation/founders who run the non-formal school.

Challenges related to problematic non-formal education

During the meeting, the following challenges were discussed:

- Within the legal framework, it is possible to create isolation, disseminate undemocratic values and deliver poor non-formal education.

- Monitoring can be difficult. In many countries, mandatory registration for non-formal education is hard. Requiring non-formal schools to register on a voluntary basis will not convince all non-formal schools, particularly those that are not reliable.

- The pedagogical climate and environment of youngsters are hard to assess. It is often unclear for practitioners in the field of education and local authorities which non-formal schools are visited by their pupils and what is being taught in these schools.

- The risk of feelings of discrimination towards non-formal schools and communities. If the authorities are too focused on security or collaboration is only started in the light of P/CVE, this feeling might be exacerbated.

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Recommendations

Participants agreed that non-formal education can be of added value and can bridge possible gaps in the daily realities of youngsters. A precondition for this is to have a basic level of common ground on values in both formal and informal education. If successful, it can in this way enrich the learning experience. For example, the Arabic language is key for understanding the sources of Islam and its texts. If that is not organised within the formal system, youngsters might have direct access by studying it in a more harmful way. As one participant stated: "In the land of the blind – the one-eyed is king." To prevent this from happening, a system needs to be established that covers both. The following recommendations are centred around the question "How can we provide a system that really makes sure the 'king' is two-eyed?"

For local authorities

- Local authorities are advised to collaborate/communicate with non-formal schools to make sure the positive potential of non-formal schools for youngsters is fully used.

- Involve non-formal schooling in your local safeguarding structures for youth where applicable and appropriate. This multi-agency approach ensures that all stakeholders know where to reach out to for advice, questions or in case of worrying signals.

- Invest in communication. Make sure it is known what the lines of communication for all parties are: who are the contact persons of all schools within the local district, and who is the contact person on the side of the local authority?

- Communicate transparently and make sure not to stigmatise. Avoid misunderstanding or prejudice about non-formal schooling.

- A possible policy choice is to establish (voluntary) quality brands (awards) of the non-formal school. In Manchester (**UK**), there is a quality brand for non-formal schools with three categories (gold, bronze, silver). This stimulates parents to send their children to schools that have higher quality standards and stimulates schools to increase their quality of teaching.

For formal schools

Collaboration between formal school – non-formal schools

- Invest in the network. Make sure there is an ongoing dialogue with communities and other grassroots actors such as mosques/imams, social workers, local authorities and so on to strengthen the pedagogical climate. Creating network meetings can be helpful to achieve this. Another way is to invite non-formal teachers to give guest lectures. This increases trust and prevents starting a dialogue only when there is a problem at stake.

- Make sure your school has a strong ethos or vision on the school's values that also provides guidance in case there are conflicting issues with this ethos. When parents sign their children up for a school, these should be made known. Sometimes such schools' policies are already in place, such as policies and guidance that are related to bullying. Have a clear vision on what the ethos of the school is and share this with parents.

- Invest in critical thinking to make pupils resilient for possible negative influences from non-formal education. To read more about this, see the RAN publication on labs for democracy.

- When courses such as civic education discuss religion, an experienced expert who can share what religion means in his or her daily life and daily practice could be invited to speak.

- Providing lessons in Arabic might guard against children having to attend Arabic schooling in a problematic informal setting. This could be done in combination with other languages to avoid polarisation.

- Involve parents and engage with them about their child's upbringing and behaviour at school. Communicate in a sensitive manner: many parents might be amazed about how their children behave in school. Sometimes behaviour that could be seen as problematic by the teacher (e.g. not wanting to participate in

certain activities) is completely unknown to parents. This can be confrontational for parents as well and requires sensitivity.

Noticing signs of worrying non-formal education

- As teachers, show genuine interest in the non-formal schooling of pupils. Only by having an open mindset will quality gaps become visible. If your pupils follow weekend school, ask them what they think about what they learn there, see where any gaps lie. With that knowledge, formal teachers can reach out to parents or weekend schools in order to collaborate and close gaps.

- Invest in general PVE training of educators to avoid possible stigmatisation and to make sure teachers pick up the right signals in case of possible radicalisation. For proper assessment of signals, an expert on (extremist) ideology who is specialised in interpreting signals might be needed. If you have some concrete signals, try to interact with local authorities to get special assistance, for example by finding a religious specialist who can help to interpret signals.

- Talk to parents about the conflict of values. Discuss how you can find a solution together. Be sensitive to the children and their parents.

- Try to visit and meet the non-formal school and to see what their values and motivations are, and possibly to get a grasp of the correctness of the signals you received. Select the right person within your school to do this and who can address these things in a genuine way.

- In case non-formal education can be designated as (possibly) problematic or worrying, and constructive dialogue or collaboration between the formal school and the mosque is not in place, the local authorities, police authorities or other P/CVE helplines should be informed. These can liaise with other (possibly national) authorities to see if further steps of action can be taken.

Relevant practices

1. **The ALEF project** in Brussels is an Arabic weekend school aimed at children aged from 6-12 years. It provides an alternative to Quran schools. The project was founded in reaction to the small availability of Arabic lessons in Europe. This caused a communication gap between children and their parents. Furthermore, youngsters were less in touch with the Arabic part of their identity. The ALEF curriculum was set up in collaboration with the Free University of Brussels, which also wanted to incorporate a sound, non-religious–oriented Arabic curriculum. The curriculum takes inspiration from general global curricula on language and identity lessons. It also incorporates elements such as critical thinking, antiracialising and developing an intercultural open mindset.

2. The **Safer Supplementary School Scheme**. Developed by the London Borough of Hounslow and funded by the UK Home Office, a voluntary code was developed. This code encourages supplementary schools to professionalise. By attaining the code, liability of the school is assured for parents, so they know that their children go to safe and secure schools. It also allows for support, including voluntary monitoring by a local authority team. The project is currently still in a pilot phase and will be translated to the national context if proven successful.

Follow-up

A dilemma that remains to be explored in further detail is how to decide whether collaboration with non-formal schooling is desirable in practice. To which extent is collaboration in the interest of the child, the school and society where should this collaboration start or end? Where to draw a line in case non-formal school is problematic? What are universal values and norms that are inclusive and should be included in every school ethos? In addition to further exploration of this, a future RAN meeting could explore suitable assessment tools that can be used to enquire

when a cooperation with a non-formal school is feasible. This meeting could further investigate whether a non-formal school is of added value for cooperation, which is now still often unclear.

At the end of the meeting, participants were requested to suggest any wishes for follow-up with regard to this topic. These included receiving further information on facilitating multicultural, plurilingual school climates and having a more in-depth look at which services local authorities can offer non-formal settings to foster a better working relationship. Another topic that was suggested to explore is how to deal with foreign (political) influence through non-formal schooling. Lastly, it was suggested to create a manifesto, similar to the RAN Education Manifesto, on the specific topic of formal/non-formal schooling. Other participants agreed that it would be helpful if RAN could assist in creating a unified approach for this.

Further reading

The RAN YF&C Issue Paper on 'The role of non-formal education in P/CVE'. This paper serves as an annex to the RAN 'Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools', complementing it with the dimension of non-formal education.

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