

EX POST PAPER

School leaders and prevention of radicalisation

Setting the conditions for a safe and democratic environment

Schools are the place for building resilience against extremist ideologies and promoting citizenship and fundamental rights. **The RAN Education (EDU) Working Group¹** was set up at the end of 2015 to contribute to this. The aim is to raise awareness of the topic, but moreover to empower and build capacity to prevent and deal with radicalisation in educational settings. As described in the Manifesto for Education², all schools have the objective to provide a safe and respectful learning environment for their students. With regard to radicalisation leading to violent extremism, schools should make ‘prevention’ work fundamental and a priority. Leadership is needed in this, hence school principals play a key role.

A group of school leaders from all over Europe therefore met in Antwerp and shared experiences and views on how they can contribute to prevention of radicalisation.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/index_en.htm

² http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/docs/manifesto-for-education-empowering-educators-and-schools_en.pdf

Intro

Many look at schools to contribute to the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism. The school is indeed one of the best places to boost resilience in young people and counter radicalisation in an early stage. School leadership can make the difference.

This ex post paper reflects on the conversations with a group of school leaders at the RAN EDU meeting that took place at the impressive Royal Athenaeum in Antwerp (BE).

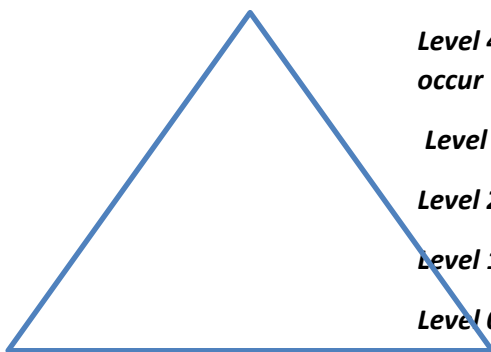
Topics that will be covered are:

- The Prevention Pyramid, a tool for principals
- There is no democratic gene, we need to challenge pupils to obtain democracy
- Pay attention and engage with those who feel left out
- Use art and creative forms of education as an alternative
- Dealing with religion, interreligious dialogue?

The Prevention Pyramid, a tool for principals

The principal or school leader is responsible for drafting a school plan, defining the policy for the school. When it comes to prevention, or even dealing with radicalisation, the Prevention Pyramid by Johan Declerck³ may be of help. This instrument is initially developed for dealing with bullying and other violence at school. But the systematic approach turns out to be useful in relation to prevention of radicalisation as well.

The prevention pyramid is a model that includes five different levels of prevention, starting from a fundamental, base level (0) that is more about awareness and orientation. From (1) to curative prevention (4) are action levels.



Level 4: tackling with actual problematic situations and incidents as they occur

Level 3: specific prevention (aimed at specific problems and risks)

Level 2: general prevention (positive measures, empowerment of staff)

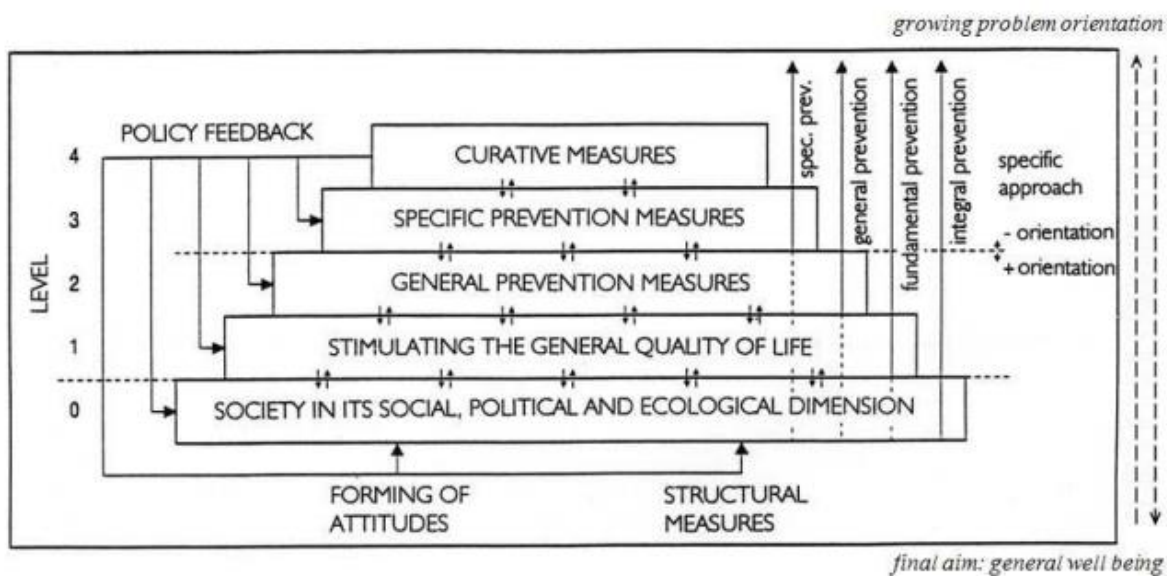
Level 1: improvement of the living environment at school

Level 0: broad, societal context (not easily influenced)

³ http://www.cndp.fr/tenue-de-classe/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/international/ijvs/ijvs10_en.pdf

The first three levels (0, 1 and 2) involve a non problem orientated approach whereas levels 3 to 4 involve a problem orientated approach.

The school leader should be aware of these different levels, and can use the pyramid as a tool to raise awareness and prepare policy decisions together with the ones who create the school, like teachers. So he can make a decision on the different levels of prevention for his school.



In general, all levels are relevant, but a school in a country that is confronted with terrorist attacks, tends to shoot towards the highest levels and there is the risk of neglecting the foundation of the prevention pyramid. Which causes a problem in the long run. Schools in a setting with less serious incidents could do less on the highest level, but should be aware and prepared.

There is no democratic gene, we need to challenge pupils to obtain democracy

The school needs to create the conditions where pupils are being exposed to democracy, so they can experience it. Democracy needs to be learned, explored to be obtained. Most of these democratic encounters take place in the class room under the guidance from the teacher, in confrontation with the teacher and other pupils. The Peaceful School, as was presented in the RAN EDU meeting in Gothenburg (SE) ⁴, is an interesting example. Young children practice democracy in all kinds of ways, because they are challenged to play a role in the daily decisions at school. This differs from defining the play ground rules to finding a solution to keep the toilets clean. Lecturing pupils the national values or preaching fundamental rights will not be the most effective way to set the conditions for pupils to grow into a democratic attitude and world view. Discussions on things happening in the world are excellent opportunities.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_empowering_and_supporting_teachers_gothenburg_24-25022016_en.pdf

Pay attention to and engage with those who feel left out

The above is of course extremely challenging for those who feel really disconnected from school and society. Who perceive grievances, and feelings of injustice and exclusion. These feelings can lead to conflicts with the environment: parents, teachers, the state and society. Or internal conflicts in terms of identity, belonging, adolescence, gender and society. Choosing an extremist ideology and group can be a way of coping with these conflicts, providing a way out in the form of a new strong identity and subculture.

Engaging with these angry dropouts is quite challenging for teachers or management of a school. The first challenge lies in the professional and personal challenge of acceptance of deviant or provoking worldviews. Expressing straight disapproval and convincing of 'wrong ideas' is the best recipe for losing contact and influence.

This might ask some professional patience and self control. And when it comes to world views and feelings that are diametrical to the values of school or the teachers own beliefs in fundamental rights, values and society, it is understandably even more challenging. But necessary.

If someone strongly believes the world is flat, you will not convince him by preaching to him that he is wrong and the world is actually round. You need to move towards the worldview of this "flat earth person", engage with him and start a conversation that might create the space for doubts, questions and critical thinking, paving the way for a successful introduction of a round earth.

The second challenge is in the potential negative reaction from the environment. Engaging with youngsters who haven't yet bought into democracy and fundamental rights, also means giving them an opportunity to express their feelings and views. If schools give an opportunity for discussions on views which are not reflected in the text books, the school policy, leadership and teachers run the risk of being confronted with critical and sometimes angry reaction from parents, colleagues, press and politicians. Teachers and other school personnel should feel safe and supported in engaging in these difficult conversations.

Reaching the ones who turn their back to the system is difficult. One strategy could be to involve role models or peers. The engaged and included students could turn out to be very successful in establishing contact with isolated or angry students. Another strategy that was discussed was *doing things*, like activities where pupils *do* an activity, using culture or other ways of expressing thought, doubts, feelings and ideas.

Use art and creative forms of education as an alternative

The Royal Athenaeum in Antwerp (BE) is an interesting example of how art can enrich the school and offer new pedagogical and didactical opportunities. The Athenaeum is an inner city school

with 555 students from many backgrounds. The school was a couple of years ago targeted by radical, and sometimes even extremist, religious groups from outside and inside school, putting pressure on Muslim students. In response, the school decided to guard the personal freedom of all students by banning the scarf and other religious manifestations. Because religion is an important component in the identity and daily lives of students, the school invested in art as an alternative way of dealing with religion and other elements of identity.

Using art has some advantages. Using art can make pupils feel they matter. You invest in them. It's an "extra". Art can be an engaging way to work

*"Pupils don't care how much you know,
but they know how much you care"*

together and have people express themselves. Art can give pupils an option to experiment with identities. Also for pupils, like refugees and others, who face language difficulties. To fully use the potential of art, you need to cooperate with professional artists.

Dealing with religion, interreligious dialogue?

In many discussions on prevention of radicalisation and education is religion "the elephant in the room". There is religion in society, in the personal lives of pupils, but the question is to what extent and in which form religion gets a place in school.

Secularity, the separation of church and state is an important value in many countries. But since religiously inspired extremism has become a problem, professionals willing to prevent radicalisation need to think about how to deal with religion. We cannot ignore religion.

Most experts on radicalisation will agree that not having a certain level of understanding of different religions and the various ways it can be practiced, makes pupils vulnerable to indoctrination and recruitment. Religious literacy paves the way for religious indoctrination that might end with jihadi's going to battle grounds with Islam for Dummies in their back pack.

Another dimension is that not knowing enough about other religions could easily fuel a process of not only not understanding, but also distancing themselves and being hostile, ending up in polarisation. Polarisation that comes with intolerance, prejudices and can lead to even hate speech - or worse.

This would support a shift from a 'laïcité of ignorance' to a laïcité of understanding'. At the RAN meeting in Antwerp there was quite some time spent on the concept of interreligious dialogue, based on empathy, in respect of shared values. Starting from their own point of view and combine it with philosophy and democracy. This is not so much teaching religion, but learning from different forms of religion and having conversations on diversity, fundamentalism, intolerance and the combination of religion and democracy. Young people need to be prepared to be a citizen in a

multi cultural society, where there are different religions. Understanding there are tensions and different opinions, but learn to fight in a peaceful way.

Conclusion

The first observation is that there is a great variety in the conditions under which schools and school leaders are able to contribute to the prevention of radicalisation. Some school leaders can draft their own policy, where others are receiving strict instructions from their government.

The second observation is that schools can contribute, but they need time and resources to change the school organisation and curriculum as we know it today. And in time of budget cuts, schools being measured by tests and growing fear of attacks in society, this is a challenge. But a challenge that school leaders not only inevitably need to change, but also are willing to face. Because schools are great places for raising young democratic citizens.