

EX POST PAPER

RAN POL and EDU meeting on 'Polarisation Management'

Introduction

The RAN POL and RAN EDU working groups both aim at empowering and inspiring first-line practitioners so they can play a crucial role in the prevention of radicalisation. RAN POL supports police and other law enforcement officials, while RAN EDU supports teachers, school leaders, and other members of school staff.

In the world at large as well as here in Europe, polarisation is reaching a critical point. School staff and police officers can play a key role in preventing and managing polarisation. This ex post paper is based on a joint meeting that took place in Stockholm on 10-11 May 2017, and describes Bart Brandsma's polarisation management model. This paper also presents the draft education and police chapters from the RAN **Polarisation Management Manual**. This manual is shared with colleagues around Europe this summer.

Introduction to polarisation, RAN and practitioners

Within the RAN community of practitioners, polarisation between different groups in society is a growing concern.

Austerity and economic reform have caused a great deal of uncertainty and anger across Europe. This uncertainty is being exploited by certain actors, who are using it to mobilise support on the basis of an 'Us and Them' narrative. This results in increased tension. The refugee and migrant crisis also provide fuel for polarisation, as did recent terrorist incidents and attacks .

The *Radicalisation* Awareness Network is not the *Polarisation* Awareness Network. Polarisation is not the key focus for practitioners preventing radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism. However, the RAN community of practitioners is concerned. We seek to *prevent* radicalisation, and by preventing and decreasing polarisation, we are creating the conditions needed to prevent individuals from being lured towards intolerant 'Us and Them' ideologies.

Polarisation has been the topic of several RAN meetings and papers. They all fit into a 2017 roadmap that will help develop and disseminate the RAN Polarisation Management Manual as a tangible tool. The Manual will take stock of:

- The RAN PREVENT meeting and paper on how to 'Prevent future violence in post-conflict areas', Zagreb (19-20 November 2012);
- The RAN POL meeting and paper on 'Successful and effective engaging with communities', Oslo (06-07 April 2016)¹;
- RAN's thematic event on refugees and polarisation (14 April 2016)²;
- A series of four RAN Member State workshops on the migrant and refugee crisis (11, 12, 13 May and 16 September 2016);
- RAN's Issue Paper on 'Tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society', (November 2016)³;
- The RAN study visit Northern Ireland (24-25 April 2017);
- 'Working on the polarisation manual', a joint RAN EDU and RAN POL meeting in Stockholm (10-11 May 2017).

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran_pol_ex_post_paper_oslo_en.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_ex_post_paper_the_refugee_and_migrant_crisis_en.pdf

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/tackling_challenges_prevention_policies_in_increasingly_polarised_society_112016_en.pdf

The RAN EDU and RAN POL joint meeting transpired to be very relevant, both on the topic of polarisation, and on bringing together police and educational practitioners. The participants recognised the Bart Brandsma model as helpful and tested it in several scenarios.

The following meetings will be added to the list of events feeding into the Manual for Polarisation Management: RAN YF&C (Youth, Families and Communities, 29-30 June 2017) and RAN H&SC (Health and Social Care, 4-5 July 2017). The public, final draft of the manual will be presented and discussed at the Thematic Event on Polarisation Management (Amsterdam, 6 July 2017).

Definition of polarisation

Polarisation – radicalisation

Polarisation is defined as ‘a thought construct based on assumptions of identities – the identities of others, who are pictured as being ‘different’’. The phenomenon involves communication and thinking based on ‘Us and Them’; ‘others’ are perceived or presented as being different and a problem or a threat to the group. Perceived differences are exaggerated in simplistic narratives about others, neglecting that which the two groups have in common.

Few would question the existence of polarisation, or its unhealthy nature. But why does it matter to those working to prevent radicalisation? Polarisation does not necessarily lead to radicalisation and radicalisation does not have to result in polarisation. The answer lies in the factors that make people vulnerable to extremist propaganda and recruitment. In its issue paper on the root causes of radicalisation, RAN wrote about a kaleidoscope of contributing factors⁴. Being affected by a process of polarisation amplifies many of the psychological and social factors that make people vulnerable to radicalisation. A heavily divided community with hostilities between groups and a strong ‘Us and Them’ mentality is the ideal breeding ground for recruiters and radicalisers following extremist ideologies, exploiting feelings of fear, distrust and rejection of ‘them’. Moreover, in a polarised situation in which hate speech is being used, as well as speech referring to violence, there is the risk of lone actors or small groups turning to violence. This has been seen in several recent cases: the individual who killed UK Member of Parliament Jo Cox, the shooting of Republican politicians in the USA, and the fire bomb attacks with ‘terrorist intent’ on a Dutch mosque. So a polarised society, in which strong, hateful ‘Us and Them’ feelings are rife, is the swamp in which extremist recruiters thrive, and where self-radicalisers turn to violence.

Theories and models

Different theories and models are used to define and characterise polarisation and its potential causes. In some studies, polarisation is explained by the concept of ‘biased assimilation’. From this perspective, people process new information in a biased manner: they readily accept evidence that confirms their view or opinion

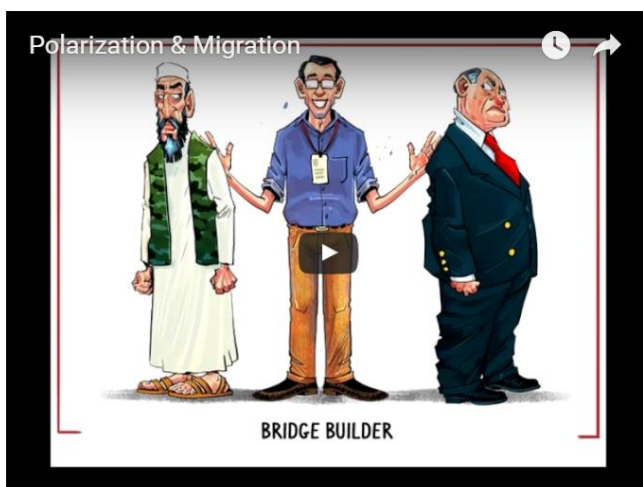
⁴http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf

and are critical towards disconfirming evidence⁵. This could cause some individuals to arrive at more extreme opinions after being exposed to identical, inconclusive evidence⁶, and may lead to polarisation.

Polarisation could show itself in negative thoughts and attitudes to other groups, resulting in growing hostility and segregation, leading to a situation in which intolerance could lead to hate speech and even hate crime. So there is a link between prejudices, intolerance, exclusion and xenophobia, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination and thinking in terms of in-groups ('us') and out-groups ('them'). Trigger events can prompt an acceleration in polarisation, catalysed and facilitated by mass media channels and social media. Fake news, framing incidents and so-called information bubbles reinforce the polarisation process.

Understanding and managing polarisation as seen by Bart Brandsma

At the joint EDU and POL meeting in Stockholm, participants discussed Bart Brandsma's Polarisation Management model⁷. For a short introduction, watch the four-minute video on [YouTube](#).



The polarisation model as described by Bart Brandsma was also presented at earlier meetings, such as the RAN POL meeting in Oslo on communities⁸ and the thematic event on the refugee crisis and challenges for prevention policies. The model is becoming popular in several countries and is being used by the Dutch police, and, for instance, at the Royal Athenaeum of Antwerp, Belgium, the school of which RAN EDU co-chair Karin Heremans is director.

To enable the RAN community of practitioners to read more about Brandsma's model, the RAN

Centre of Excellence translated a lengthy excerpt from his book into English. It can be downloaded at: <https://www.polarisatie.nl/eng-home/>. A summary is provided below.

Brandsma claims polarisation is built upon *three rules* and *five roles*:

Three rules:

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3625335>

⁶ Lord CG, Ross L, Lepper MR. Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1979;37(11):2098–2109.

⁷ Bart Brandsma <https://www.polarisatie.nl/eng-home-1/>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran_pol_ex_post_paper_oslo_en.pdf

1. Polarisation is a *thought construct*, 'Us-and-Them' thinking, based on identities and groups;
2. Polarisation *needs fuel*; it thrives on discussion about identities in combination with judgment. If there is no communication, no energy put into the polarisation, it will die out;
3. Polarisation is about *feelings and emotions*. Facts and figures won't do the job.

The five roles

1. The *Pushers* are trying to create polarisation, they are the instigators acting from the poles. They claim 100 % truth and are **more in the 'send mode' than the 'listen mode'**. **They don't want real dialogue;**
2. The *Joiners* have chosen sides and moved towards the pushers; this is polarisation taking place;
3. The *Silent in the middle ground*, the nuanced, are not choosing sides, not taking part in polarisation. They could be neutral, scared or indifferent. They are targeted by the pushers;
4. The *Bridge-builder* is trying to bring peace and moderation by reaching out to both opposing poles. But, by doing so, he or she underlines the existence of the two poles, adding fuel;
5. The *Scapegoats* are being blamed or attacked, these could be the non-polarised 'in the middle ground' or the bridge-builders.

Four game changers:

1. Change *the target audience*. Pushers portray an enemy in the other and target the middle ground. That's where polarisation is intended. So, target the middle ground for depolarisation;
2. Change *the topic*. Move away from the identity construct chosen by the pushers and start a conversation on the common concerns and interest of those in the middle ground;
3. Change *position*. Don't act above the parties, in between the poles, but move towards the middle ground;
4. Change *the tone*; this is not about right or wrong or facts. Use mediating speech and try to engage and connect with the diverse middle ground.

These roles, rules and game changers were overwhelmingly endorsed at the joint meeting.

Brandsma describes how some actors have a sanitising role to play. Teachers, school principals, police officers, mayors, social workers – in their professional role and ethos – feel the need to prevent further polarisation. They have a leadership role to fulfil. But there is a risk that, in trying to do so, they add new fuel to polarisation. If their communication and interventions feed the dichotomy – the black and white 'Us and Them' construct, they may end up helping the pushers. They may be fuelling polarisation for instance by playing the role of the neutral bridge-builder and trying to override differences if they start a dialogue between the polarising pushers. By acting within the frame and the game of the pushers, they make even more visible the existence of the two constructed poles.

Polarisation – conflict

Brandsma distinguishes between polarisation and conflict. Polarisation is an artificial construction of identities, whereas in conflict, there is a real incident. For conflict to have taken place, there must have

been an incident, perpetrators and victims. Something has been broken or stolen, or there are people wounded. There are people directly involved who are fighting over something. They are problem-owners.

Polarisation is about people who are being targeted by narrow identity communication and pressured to choose sides – to enter the polarisation game. Neither definition of the problem nor problem ownership are very clear. Are all Muslims part of a conflict if an attack takes place? Or are some actors trying to pull people into a 'black and white identity construct'? When conflict occurs, we can rely on a long tradition of mediation and peace building. The dynamics of polarisation are however different. Familiar elements from conflict mediation, like *mediating speech* and *mediating behaviour* are helpful, but polarisation also requires other approaches. That's where the abovementioned three rules, five roles and four game-changers come into play.

Police and education in the Polarisation Management Manual

Before moving ahead to the chapters on police and education, it is appropriate to highlight tasks that these practitioners have in common, and that they share with other actors.

Do no harm, understand the dynamics of polarisation

Whatever your profession, it is wise to invest in understanding the unique nature of polarisation to make sure that your actions and communications don't unintentionally serve polarisation and its pushers. This is why a training session on the on rules, roles and game-changers makes sense.

Don't be belatedly surprised. Be prepared!

Try to build up a sensitivity – or procedures – on how to respond to the first signs of potentially problematic polarisation. Through internal assessments, checking with partners or data, try to identify polarisation at a stage where it is still easy to manage.

Polarisation management needs multi-agency cooperation

Because polarisation is a societal process, many actors in society can influence it in a positive or negative way. Multi-agency cooperation is therefore needed for polarisation management. All relevant actors must be involved in coordinating information and actions – especially when polarisation reaches a concerning level.

Be aware of the vulnerability of practitioners whose background is relevant to the situation

Colleagues with a background which is part of the polarisation frame could be confronted with questions or even accusations about their position. This could make them vulnerable.

The following two chapters, one inspired by the RAN POL participants, the other by RAN EDU participants, combine the model sketched out here with sector-specific expertise.

Police and polarisation management

Why is polarisation relevant for the police?

The answer is: not only because polarisation could lead to public disorder or hate crimes, but also because pushers of polarising messages often point to a ‘Them’ group in combination with threats, injustice, perceived double standards and safety risks. This brings the state and the police into the picture. Policing for all, police that serve and protect all, upholding the rule of law – and being seen to do so – are key. One could say that ‘delivering’ on tackling crime, and protecting communities in a neutral, professional way, is the ‘hard contribution’ to polarisation management. The ‘soft contribution’ comes from community policing, working on a local and often personal level to communicate inclusion, showing empathy, and building relations and networks. These are the first lines of defence against polarisation. At the same time, police should understand that their actions and communication can be a crucial catalyst for polarisation. Unintentionally, the police can, through their actions, feed polarisation between groups in society, or between groups and the police or other authorities.

Whereas the police are normally reactive, responding to incidents, polarisation management is about the pre-criminal phase and prevention. Polarisation can be described as a societal process that manifests itself in hate crimes and other incidents. So the police need to understand the symptoms, and join the dots to understand any potential polarisation in motion. Like Plato’s cave: it’s not about the shadows on the wall, but the things that create the shadows.



For the police, there are three clusters of relevant actions in relation to polarisation:

- preventing polarisation developing between groups in society;
- knowing how to act when polarisation and conflict occur after a serious trigger incident;
- acting on polarisation within the police force.

What can police do to prevent the escalation of polarisation between groups in society?

How to be prepared, and not be belatedly surprised about polarisation

- See it coming, for instance through local or national community tension monitoring. This can also be carried out by a network of local actors feeding a centralised point that makes assessments. What’s on people’s minds? Pay attention to changes in attitudes and perceptions. Combine this with data, social media monitoring and assessments of developments locally, nationally and globally, that might impact the manifestation of polarisation locally.
- Take a holistic approach, encompassing the proactive gathering of community intelligence.
- Assess a situation in terms of conflict and polarisation. The two are intertwined, but the approach required for conflict is different to that needed for polarisation. Try to identify the pushers, joiners, individuals and groups in the middle ground.
- Work on early detection of tensions and tension fields. Monitor tensions within or between groups; monitor friction between different identity groups. Community police should, in cooperation with municipalities and NGOs, detect and address bad vibes that are potential indicators of polarisation, such as hate crimes, or arguments between neighbours.

- Employ a multi-agency approach, with a clear command structure and process; include partner agencies such as the local authority – be clear in terms of primacy (police for investigation, local authority for community cohesion) and convene regular meetings, informed by the latest community tension assessment, to agree on and monitor actions.
- Organise a table-top exercise on escalating polarisation, involving the key stakeholders in the area, to raise awareness and make them aware of how well prepared they are.
- Engage in dialogues at different levels, such as neighbourhood, city, region, country (national Security Council). Invest in listening: what's on the people's minds?
- Have a media strategy – transparency of procedures and a 'neutral' police position are key. A fast response time is required – social media strategy is important – dispel myths and shut down the space in which fake news can gain any traction.

How to deal with the different actors and the dynamics of polarisation

- Police should work hard on being perceived as trustworthy and neutral so that they can guard the playing field, with a mandate awarded by agencies and the people. Besides being neutral, being engaging, helpful and protective are key. Being seen to have an active policy on being open and responsive to hate crimes can help here.
- Police should build sustainable and long-term networks around specific tension fields and related issues. At the same time, build relations in specific groups and in specific boroughs / areas. Network from a multitude of perspectives.
- Search, detect and connect with specific stakeholders. Engage with the different roles in different ways:
 - Carefully manage potential bridge-builders in the police network by re-focusing efforts so that they do not become scapegoats and counter-productive.
 - Keep in mind that public dialogues held with pushers can be excellent support for pushers when badly timed and in the wrong setting.
 - Establish a 'pusher management' strategy for pushers and active and visible joiners with bad intentions (increasing tensions, fuelling polarisation, promoting violence etc.). Look at both groups, and isolate individuals if possible. Side-line / marginalise / neutralise them and don't add credence to their voices.
 - Engage with stakeholders from the middle ground. That means targeting the influential stakeholders in relation to specific issue(s) and / or concerns – citizens with plural loyalties who could contribute in a positive way. These are credible voices and you should try to establish alliances with them. Engage with informal leaders and individuals in communities. This can add crucial information in addition to official reactions by official spokespersons. Consider re-focusing messaging towards the middle ground – what are the issues and concerns of the silent majority and how can we exploit this to change the subject or tone?
- An active and pro-active media strategy is required – social media is key here – it is important in dispelling myths and shutting down the space in which fake news can gain traction.
- Focus media releases on the positive actions taken by the police in terms of an investigation, as well as community impact, rather than challenging the poles.

How to respond to public disorder or crime provoked by polarisation

Responses are similar to those used for restoring order, criminal investigation and crisis management. While conflict and crime may be involved, the approach taken will influence polarisation. It is essential to keep people safe, re-establish trust and uphold the rule of law.

What to do when polarisation boils over into a serious incident

- Manage the crisis and protect – the immediate response should restore order, offer reassurance and prevent further offences.
- Establish a clear command structure and process to include partner agencies such as the local authority – be clear in terms of primacy (police for investigation, municipality for community cohesion) and convene regular meetings, informed by the latest community tension summary and updated risk assessment, to agree and monitor actions. This should be dealt with before a crisis occurs.
- Evidence capture – crime scene investigation, identification of key witnesses, collection of statements, identification of suspects, suspect management – the standard policing / investigative response must continue in order to maintain confidence in police and provide care to victim(s).
- Community tension monitoring – for risk assessment. Social media monitoring is key here to ensure an accurate picture of tensions so that the police do not simply engage with long-term community contacts who may have a vested interest in one side or the other. Take a holistic approach, including the proactive gathering of community intelligence.
- In times of crisis, the close monitoring of groups and individuals on the brink of radicalisation can be very informative.
- Identify the background to the event, including any specific trigger, to anticipate further triggers.
- Have a proactive communication strategy. Include framework, tone and message, and be sharp on your own language and words in relation to incidents and problems (stereotyping, biases). Have your own story before the media creates it for you...
- In your approach and moreover your communication, beware of feeding polarisation, think about the four game changers.
- Communicate mediating messages praising good deeds by actors on both sides; show empathy. By doing this, you invest in the groups in the middle ground.
- Consider how best to use resources: is it best to exploit officers with heritage from the affected communities, or should this be avoided on the basis that it will fuel feelings that the police are partisan? Caution is needed here, and the response will need to be defined based on the circumstances of a particular case.

Polarisation within the police, among colleagues

Police officers wear a uniform. But beneath the uniform is a human being, with sometimes strong emotions, fuelled by what officers experience during their daily work. Unfortunately it is not unheard of to see police officers expressing personal intolerant or polarising views. A uniformed police culture comes with lots of jokes and banter, including about race and sexuality.

The first line of defence against polarisation, and in favour of police being an effective actor in managing polarisation in the local area, is a professional police organisation. Police must act – and be perceived as acting – neutral. They must serve and protect all.

What can a team leader do when confronted with polarisation within his or her team?

Bart Brandsma's polarisation management method⁹ suggests team leaders follow a three-step approach when polarisation arises within a team:

⁹ Implemented in pilots within the Dutch National Police

1. Colleagues are invited to share their views. This is about exploring and not about discussion. There is no moral judgement. Participants should neither moralise nor judge, and should instead ask questions. Asking questions draws people strongly towards the middle, while expressing judgments pushes people out towards the poles.
2. A fundamental and generic discussion on the professional role for the police should make clear: “this is not about personal opinions, not about left or right. We are neutral and have to treat all citizens equally and offer security and protection to everyone”. Ask colleagues which behaviour will be needed to achieve the professional norm.
3. After accepting the outcomes of step 2, colleagues are invited – in a final step – to transpose these shared and agreed norms and behaviours onto their own specific situation: what does it mean in their town or city? What is going on? How should different actors be approached?

How to build a professional and healthy police culture, resilient against polarisation

Although presented here in the Polarisation Management Manual, this is actually a ‘must’ for any police organisation wanting to act as a professional organisation protecting and serving all. Polarisation is one more reason to pay attention to:

- Leadership, which is crucial in setting professional standards, core values and integrity within the police organisation. Train the managers in polarisation.
- Dealing with stereotypes and prejudices in a training environment.
- Addressing the first signs of polarising behaviour. Have a private talk – avoiding giving public air time to pushers’ positions and messages. Go on patrol with the officer and set the boundaries.
- Craftsmanship. Training on the job and dialogue within teams. How should moral dilemmas be addressed? What are the best ways to cope with frictions between an individual’s identity and the tasks of a neutral police officer? This is far from easy; sometimes it is very complicated. These issues require dialogue.

Practices to learn from

Rotterdam Police – inter-group polarisation (the Netherlands)

The Dutch police found Bart Brandsma’s method helpful for managing polarisation between groups in the Rotterdam-Turkish communities.

The failed coup in Turkey led to tensions in the Dutch society. Besides of sentiments amongst Dutch Turkish persons, some Dutch persons started questioning their integration in the Netherlands. Moreover, tensions started to increase between pro-Erdogan and followers of Gülen living in Rotterdam. In this matter of polarisation, the Rotterdam police took the following steps:

- 1. Organise urgency, mandate and command. Videos, messages on and the impact of the coupe were combined in a presentation to the management to make them ‘feel’ the urgency. Moreover, two high ranked officers with complementary qualities were mandated to be charge.*
- 2. Understanding the social dynamics. This was done in cooperation with stakeholders to help the police to anticipate and also make clear what to not do for sure. The trauma which was created in the Turkish society because of the events in Turkey was acknowledged.*
- 3. Restrict and protect fast. A specific group of police officers, with well-developed empathic skills, handled all the reports. Taking care of this immediately was crucial and created trust.*
- 4. Dare to differentiate – tailor made interventions. Investments were made in building on personal relations with victims. Moreover, the team did not include officers with Turkish background because of neutrality, sensitivity and to safeguard them from personal risks.*

5. Organise intelligence position and products. Many different networks were combined for this.
6. Invest in connection and relation management.

National Community Tension Team NCCT (United Kingdom)

In the UK, the NCTT is a national team that uses data provided by individual police forces on a weekly basis to monitor, assess and inform appropriate responses to changes in community tensions. Community tensions are assessed locally by looking at information from four sources: 1) force intelligence 2) community engagement 3) open source (news media, blogs, academic papers etc.) 4) social media (instant response).

The assessment leads to a document which is sent to all police forces and relevant government departments. It is known as an EEP assessment:

- *Experienced: how do communities feel?*
- *Evidenced: what has happened or is happening?*
- *Potential: what might happen or has the potential to happen?*

In each area, a Single Point of Contact is appointed to develop the local community tension summaries, to ensure this activity is prioritised and to encourage police and partners to feed relevant information into the process.

Education and polarisation management

Why is polarisation relevant for education?

Schools are not immune to polarisation. While teachers are facing polarised situations in their classrooms, or seeing their students separated into groups in the playground, school principals are having to deal with polarisation in the staffroom and the broader school community. But when does a situation at school become too polarised? Is it a problem if students stand in separate groups in the playground? Isn't playing and even provoking about identity and subculture actually part of development from childhood to adulthood? And don't we want to empower youngsters to use their voices – even if they share extreme ideas – to have open conversations about topics that interest them? Where should we draw the line? When does the school principal become too much a mayor or police officer, instead of 'just' a school leader?

This chapter describes polarisation in the classroom, school and community levels, and offers guidelines on how to deal with polarisation at each level.

How to prevent polarisation at classroom level

Teachers need to be prepared to deal with polarisation at classroom level. They are the ones seeing their students every day, and are the first to be challenged by polarising statements from students. Moreover, they have the earliest opportunity to prevent a small incident from becoming a larger problem. Teachers are however also challenged by polarisation that might go unnoticed by some, since it happens in silence.

As described in the 'RAN EDU Guide on training programmes', teachers need certain fundamental skills to ensure they are both empowered and resilient. These include: being aware of your own vision, values, strengths and limits; having interactive skills; and being able to discuss real-world problems in the classroom.

As described in ‘Teaching controversial issues’¹⁰, teachers can take on different roles in the classroom such as a neutral chairperson, the devil’s advocate or ally. In light of growing polarisation, it is especially important for a teacher to pick the right role and create a good environment for dialogue so that all students feel safe and comfortable. Teachers should listen to all students and let them express their emotions.

How can teachers create the right environment to prevent or deal with polarisation?

- Create and build upon shared values within the classroom. Students do not all need to have the same values, but it helps if there are some shared values in common, e.g. equality. These values also reflect the mini-society that the classroom is.
- Set clear rules. If someone talks, the others should listen and vice versa. This requires facilitating skills from the teacher.
- Show empathy as a teacher, instead of continuously trying to ‘win’ students over to your arguments. Try to figure out why students say what they say, what is behind their statement.
- Be sensitive to conflicts and be prepared to address them. Provide a safe space for this. A talk on sensitive issues takes time, so do not try to squeeze it into a short five-minute talk. It might be wise to organise regular debates in your classroom.
- Make someone in each class responsible for polarisation issues. This student should represent the class and talk with the teacher if problems arise so that they can come up with solutions together.
- Actively apply school rules and common values in your lessons, especially in difficult situations.
- Use the Bart Brandsma model to discuss polarisation in your classroom. A moderated version might be needed, especially for younger students. This model will give you and the students the language needed to discuss polarisation and also spot it when it takes place.
- As a teacher, you should teach a subject, and this is the main focus of your lessons. But you should never forget the relationship you have with your students, and that sometimes a ‘time-out’ is needed.
- The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change has provided some interesting tips on dialogue: http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Essentials-of-Dialogue_0.pdf

How to recognise polarisation as a teacher

- If students do not listen to each other or do not want to sit next to each other physically, it might be good to have an open talk as polarisation may be at play.

How to prevent polarisation at school level

In addition to polarisation taking place in the classroom, it can also occur at school level, or even amongst school staff members or in the staffroom. In order to prevent polarisation, it is important that investment is

¹⁰ Available online at: <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>

made in the middle ground, and that inclusion and not exclusion is promoted. School staff should also work closely together as a team, following the same rules and school ethos.

How to prevent polarisation at school level

- As a school principal, you should invest in the middle ground. Invest in the school culture and school ethos, for example by training staff on these. School values should be clear to all school staff and students.
- As a school principal, you should be clear to all about the school rules.
- Be alert! Take a look at the staffroom: do teachers always sit separately in certain groups? It might be a good idea to discuss this observation with them. You could also bring in a neutral observer.
- Use case studies to discuss different levels of polarisation with your team.
- Teach all students conflict resolution skills as well as democratic values.
- Make sure you work regularly on team-building, for example by introducing team-building activities. This will ensure strong connections within the team and help the setting of common goals.

How best to work with parents to prevent polarisation

- Make sure that parents understand the values and ethos of the school of which their child is part. As school principal, you can discuss them with parents when their child registers. You can also seek opportunities, like parents' evenings, to reinforce (awareness of) those values.
- Parents are an essential group in the middle ground. Schools can engage with them on the interest they share in ensuring the school provides a safe and inspiring community in which their children can learn: "How can we, school and parents, contribute to this together?"
- Parents who play a *pusher's role* should be managed by applying game changers. The first is: don't give them a platform to play their polarisation game. Engage with them in a closed, private and less public setting to avoid offering them a public polarisation platform.

How to prevent polarisation as schools while being part of a local community

Even though a school is a community in itself, it is not an island. Schools have a connection with their partners, environment and broader society. There is even a pedagogical benefit to extending school activities beyond the school gates – it ensures they are relevant to the real world, where the students' homes and neighbours are.

When dealing with problematic polarisation, schools might also need to cope and deal with their environment, especially if it is polarised and therefore affecting the school (climate). To be prepared, for polarisation both inside and outside the school gates, schools need to proactively build a relationship of trust with their partners. This should preferably take place during peace time, before any evidence of polarisation is apparent.

Be prepared for unexpected rough times. Schools might have to identify the 'right' partners and to motivate them to invest in the relationship. It may also be challenging to find the right tone in communication with parents, partners and, in a broader sense, with the community. Even though schools face these challenges and cannot change society on the one hand, they can on the other hand change how they deal with society and raise awareness of how to deal with polarisation.

How best to work in a multi-agency setting

- ‘Repair the roof in summertime’: be prepared!
- Build on existing contacts and multi-agency networks and reach out for instance to housing agencies, sports clubs, youth workers, the municipality and police. Present the school as a partner who is best positioned to engage with young people and their parents.
- Run a short scenario workshop with a fictitious but not unlikely scenario. Find out if people are able to reach out to other relevant actors in the area.
- Set up a multi-agency working group with a range of disciplines. This could include local authorities, family groups and police, and will help these people to see things from different perspectives. In addition to a common purpose, this group needs to develop common terminology. Using the right words and changing tone are especially important when cooling down is needed.
- Motivate different partners to join the working group.
- Search for and select the right persons and representatives, for example those practitioners who are already part of RAN.
- Focus on finding ‘convincers’ and ‘connectors’.
- Create connections by having an informal discussion on shared topics of interest.
- Show that the working group is connected to reality and create a sense of urgency.
- Note that not everyone needs to be involved, keep the group as small as possible.

How to use social media

- Use social media as a way of communicating with the outside world, and be sure to see the non-polarised middle ground as a target audience. A Twitter account could provide alternative narratives on events that affect the school. A Facebook account could be used as a platform to communicate the school’s values, and to build an online community.

How to cooperate with other schools

- Set up twinning projects between schools in the same area; this could involve joint school projects and exchanges between pupils. These projects provide schools with an opportunity to contribute to social cohesion and mitigate the segregation that is manifest in many parts of the school. Such initiatives may also enhance students’ appreciation of cultural and social diversity.

Practices to learn from

Dealing with polarisation at school and class level (Belgium)

The Royal Atheneum of Antwerp has faced various peaks of polarisation, which had an impact on the atmosphere within the school. To deal with this, the focus was changed to the middle (ground). The school has, among other initiatives, created a basic set of common values. It also uses intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, and focuses on active citizenship.

Following the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, polarisation appeared in a new form: those supporting Gülen versus those supporting Erdogan. The school therefore decided to invest in depolarisation training for all teachers, and introduced a new focus on history, including a special

school day on the history of the Turkish empire. A group of 10 teachers / key figures attended a more in-depth training programme of two days, based on the Bart Brandsma model. At classroom level, the importance of understanding the model was emphasised to all teachers, as was the need to address polarisation without fear. There is no need for significant, specialised knowledge to address issues like this; simply applying the model and the right communication skills will help teachers.

Dealing with polarisation by teaching controversial issues (practical guide)

To prevent polarisation, teachers need to be able to handle controversial issues in the classroom. The guide on [‘Teaching controversial issues’](#) provides practical tools and knowledge for teachers. For example, it offers guidance for teachers on how to introduce controversial issues in the classroom, on teaching methods for controversial issues, and how to reflect on and evaluate discussions. The guide also shows how investing in basic fundamentals can create professional effectiveness and empowered teachers.

Dealing with polarisation by cooperating with the police (Sweden)

The Rinkeby school is located in one of the poorest parts of Stockholm, in a neighbourhood that is home to people of diverse cultural backgrounds. The area has suffered many challenges, and is known for social unrest. The school, the police and the municipality cooperate closely to address these challenges. They communicate daily on neighbourhood tension levels using a traffic light system: is the situation green – yellow – red?