05/30/2023
CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Y&E meeting Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth
7-8 March 2023, online

Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth

Key outcomes

The central theme of the online RAN Youth & Education working group meeting on 7 & 8 March 2023 was resilience building for young people against negative polarisation and radicalisation. The need for discussing this topic was stressed during various RAN meetings, as well as in media and research. After all, various experts state that the COVID-lockdowns of the past years have had a big impact on the mental health of young people. Moreover, they missed the opportunity to practice their democratic citizenship during crucial years of their development. Also, increased importance of social media, together with a constant news stream of world crises, has put large pressure on youngsters.

According to practitioners in our meeting, these developments had serious consequences for the general wellbeing of young people, which became increasingly visible in the classroom and in youth work organisations. Discussions tend to quickly escalate, which might polarise groups and isolate individuals even more. This is rather concerning in the logic of primary prevention, which is why extra efforts are needed to resocialise these young people into becoming democratic citizens. The five building blocks of resilience which we discussed in this meeting were:

- **Emotional resilience:** The capacity to manage and navigate emotions. Developing emotional resilience is vital for safeguarding mental health and overall well-being, particularly among young individuals.

- **Conflict resolution:** The ability to deal with disagreement and solve interpersonal conflict in a non-violent and constructive way.

- **Multi-perspectivity:** Actively considering multiple viewpoints and perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of complex issues such as history, current affairs or personal situations.

- **Personal trust between practitioner and pupil:** Practitioners have more impact on a pupil when there is a good base of personal trust between them. However, this trust is not a given, but has to be earned.

- **Critical thinking:** The ability to analyse and evaluate information in a rational and objective manner, considering alternative perspectives, and questioning assumptions and one's own position.

In this conclusion paper, we will first elaborate on the 'setting the scene' discussion at the start of the meeting on how the participants experienced the problem stated. Then, we will provide a more in-depth overview of the discussions around these topics and the recommendations formulated for practitioners to include in their daily work.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting started by exploring how the participants experience and observe the central topic of this meeting. They generally agreed that there are indeed more heated discussions than before the pandemic, and that there are a lack of certain democratic skills. However, some important nuances were also made.

- The discussions are not necessarily more explosive than several years ago, but the explosive discussions are more numerous. Society today shows more differences than before, and thus carries more potentially polarising topics.

  - ➢ Participants characterised this as the 'super-diversity' of current society, which is visible in the classroom. This goes beyond mere multi-culturality and also reflects diversity within cultural groups, encompassing other divides in society like socio-economical position, education or gender.

  - ➢ Several participants indicated that at this moment, a gap between genders and polarisation around masculinity is right now creating the most tensions and difficult conversations.

- It is normal, and has always been normal, for young people to provoke and challenge norms and authority. This can always play out either positively or negatively. For the past decades, we have encouraged young people to be outspoken and critical. Now they are critical, but the problem is that they seem to be less open and respectful to other viewpoints.

  - ➢ The problem is not necessarily that youth are speaking their minds, but the lack of willingness to speak up constructively and the willingness to listen to others' opinions. Freedom of speech is essential, but this freedom also has to be acknowledged and safeguarded for others, with opposing views. Therefore, it is mostly the attitude and behaviour that is problematic.

  - ➢ More people claiming their rights is not a bad thing, but the friction this causes in the classroom has to be educational. Teachers and youth workers play a crucial role in this, but they have to be informed about the specific controversial topics and narratives, and need to be equipped to deal with the discussion.

We asked the participants which topics cause the most heated discussions today. The participants mentioned gender identity, the war in Ukraine, sexual orientation and racism.

- A pattern was described that each of these topics are specifically controversial for a certain, relatively short amount of time. Coverage in traditional media and social media play a big role in determining what issues are being debated.

  - ➢ Some topics really feel as a part of the identity of a young person. Therefore, pushback on these topics can feel very much like a personal attack and thus tends to escalate discussions.

Building blocks for resilience

As explained, five approaches were discussed that should be considered when contributing to the wellbeing and resilience of young people. For each topic, we had a plenary presentation, a break-out discussion, and a round of plenary feedback and discussion. The following was discussed for each approach:

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Emotional resilience

The ways people respond to polarisation are mostly driven by emotions, which can create further distance between people and even lead to violence. We thus have to be aware of this emotion-driven response and be able to manage these emotions, as well as help young people with managing their emotions themselves. To do this, **emotional resilience** is needed. Emotional resilience is a combination of emotional literacy and emotional intelligence. The main takeaways on this topic are the following:

- **Emotional literacy** is the ability to bring emotions into words. There are eight basic emotions, like happy or angry, but within these, there is many more nuances, such as proud, confident or hopeful, or annoyed, jealous and sceptical. The better we formulate how we feel, the better we will be able to regulate these emotions.

- **Emotional intelligence** is the ability of a person to recognise his or her own emotions and regulate them. It is also the ability to recognise the emotions of others and positively adapt to them. If one is emotionally intelligent, they will be able to contain their anger.

- A related concept here is **emotional contagion**, which transfers (both positive and negative) emotions to others, and makes people experience the same emotions as those around them. A study showed that emotions on social media are also contagious, which can create mass outrage.

Being able to control emotions is a basic protective factor for mental health and general wellbeing. Emotional resilience is thus essential in PVE to make young people resilient to crises and heated discussions, so they won't escalate in their behaviour. Note that emotional resilience is not only important for youngsters, but also for practitioners. They might also experience identity threat and let emotions escalate the situation.

Conflict resolution

Another aspect of prosocial democratic behaviour is the ability to deal with disagreement and solve interpersonal conflict in a non-violent and constructive way. For this, the school or youth work organisation should create an atmosphere that promotes conflict resolution.

- Setting concrete rules for a group discussion is important. People should be free to speak their mind, but the statements may not be in conflict with the law, their intention may not be to upset others, and it must be relevant to the topic of discussion.

- People should be reflective about their own position and behaviour:

  o Before they say something, people should ask themselves whether what they want to say is **true** (if they feel friction or opposition people tend to lie or pretend), **relevant** (deflecting the discussion is a coping mechanism when being put in a corner) and **kind** (do you have to be unfriendly to get your point across?).

  o People should engage in discussions with the willingness to be constructive, to consider the other's arguments, and to acknowledge the possibility they might be wrong themselves.

- Empathic curiosity is essential to understand the world in its full complexity, including the perspective of the other. Moreover, wanting to understand the other person increases their willingness to understand you in return.

Multi-perspectivity

In a polarised environment, people tend to only look at things from their own point of view. The image below shows why this is inadequate to make claims on truth and morality. When you look at any object from only one side, you can't see what the object looks like from the other side, so you don't know what the object really looks like. The

same goes for any event or discussion. Perspective is determined by the position someone is in, and communication is needed to know the perspective from other people, and thus to know the reality.
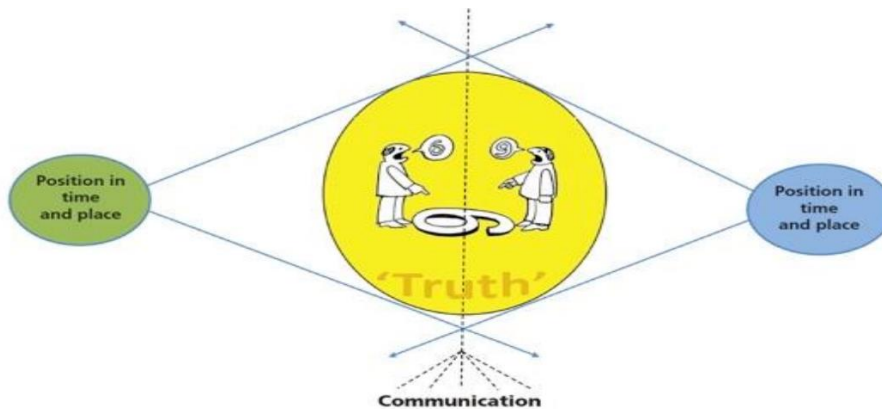
- There is a difference between ideological polarisation and affective polarisation. Ideological polarisation is normal in a democracy, and just covers opposing views and opinions. However, affective polarisation goes further and really rejects other views, both emotionally and morally. Young people can learn how to disagree, guided by a teacher or youth worker.

- If the topic of a controversial discussion in class is related to the identity of a student, they might experience **identity threat**. If this self-concept is being challenged, people will feel threatened and might get very defensive, leading to heated situations. Therefore, it can be beneficial to start with less controversial 'cold' topics or refer to unrelated but comparable historical events as an example.

- What is essential when discussing controversial topics in a de-polarising way, are the **communion** (warmth and personal trust) & **agency** (dominance and ability to steer the discussion) of the teacher. According to research, students are more willing to positively participate in a discussion when a teacher scores high on both these factors.

Building trust between practitioner and pupil

As mentioned just above, the personal relation and trust between practitioner and pupil is essential when steering discussions in a constructive way. Moreover, positive role models and trustful mentors count as protective factors for young people in general, and thus also within P/CVE. In recent decades, dynamics of the classroom have shifted from a strictly asymmetrical relationship towards less unconditional acceptance of authority. Teachers and youth workers thus now have to do more efforts to earn trust and create an educational climate based on trust and care.

- Schools and youth work organisations have to take these societal changes regarding authority into account and adapt their rules and practices. Critical thinking is now incorporated in many curricula and programmes, but emotional resilience not yet. Problems outside of school are often being brought into the classroom. Teachers have to take this into account.

- There is no trust without safety, so students must feel that they will be protected in case of discrimination or bullying. A school/youth work ethos is needed with clear rules and transparency.

- Relations of trust between practitioners and pupil are very delicate. Trust needs to be developed very carefully, but one incident can be enough to lose it.

- An important remark was that informal settings or activities are the best places to build trust and relationship. Pupils then see the practitioner in a different setting and perspective, where practitioners can show more of their personal side (while staying professional). The relationships build in such activities are being transferred to the classroom.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse and evaluate information in a rational and objective manner, considering alternative perspectives, and questioning assumptions and one's own position. This is essential to build resilience against radicalisation for several reasons.

- Young people should be able to recognise and question extremist ideas, identify and evaluate sources of information, develop empathy for people with different opinions, and evaluate the consequences of their actions, especially considering violence.

- Having these skills would enhance self-awareness and multi-perspectivity, and prevent cognitive rigidity and black and white thinking. However, there are various cognitive biases that hinder this critical thinking. Our brains are hardwired to notice, seek and accept information that confirms our existing worldviews, and receiving contesting information can make people react very strongly.

- These critical thinking skills need to be practiced throughout the upbringing of young people, and schools and youth work organisations play an important role in this. Practitioners have the position to challenge the youngsters' existing worldviews, and can use creative methods like arts or gaming to do this.

Relevant practices

- **UFUQ** (DE): Discussing the Israel and Palestine conflict in the classroom is a complex and sensitive task, given the long history and polarised opinions around it. In Germany, there are both very strong pro-Palestine sentiments, as well as a strong emphasis on the protection of Israel. In textbooks, the focus on Israel and Palestine revolves primarily around the conflict itself, rather than exploring the social aspects of life in the region. Similarly, the depiction of Islam and migration often centres around the religious, cultural, and social conflicts, leading to a sense of othering towards Muslim religiosity.

  The approach in the UFUQ booklet provides suggestions for addressing these controversies in the classroom. It acknowledges that polarised perspectives are not limited to Jewish or Palestinian students, but are influenced by personal emotions and experiences. The Israel-Palestine conflict acts as a projection screen for various other controversies such as discrimination, identity, belonging and media education. Teaching about this topic is thus not limited to foreign history and politics, but is also entangled with today's German society.

  The focus in this approach is on stimulating perspective-shifting. By contextualising and comparing a situation, educators can demonstrate the complexities involved, while acknowledging the legitimacy of claims from both sides.

Recommendations

Throughout the meeting, the participants formulated recommendations for other practitioners.

- If you notice that a pupil is reacting very heavily on a topic, start with asking questions, not with giving your own opinion. Opposing their opinion might directly make them even more defensive.

- Talking about friction begets friction, talking about uniting topics is beneficial to foster an accepting group atmosphere. This positive atmosphere is a condition for talking about delicate topics.

- Make use of creative ways to express emotions and opinions, such as arts. This can trigger youngsters to open up in ways they would not do verbally.

- Practitioners need to have a good understanding of the personal backgrounds of their pupils, as it is important to know what a youngster is dealing with at home. Be supportive, but not intrusive or naïve.

- For projects, approach your pupils in a collaborative and inclusive way. Consider them as valid partners without patronising them. Look for their feedback, accept their critical remarks and incorporate their suggestions. Make sure that the results of a project are tangible, so the youngsters can see the results of their effort.

- Deliver what you promise, projects often have a good start, but over the long term adults might change occupations or projects and leave youngsters disappointed. This can be a cause for disengagement.

Follow up

As we see that many people are radicalising in fragmented hybrid ideologies instead of big coherent narratives, people might be more polarised because of emotions. Therefore, more knowledge on mental health, emotion regulation and emotional resilience related to radicalisation and P/CVE is essential. This is knowledge could be expanded through training or peer-learning with experts on youth mental health. This could be organised and facilitated by the schools and youth work organisations (separate or jointly), supported by local, regional or national authorities.

The discussed gender gap and tensions around topics of masculinity and gender are on the agenda of the RAN Youth & Education Working Group and will be discussed in a following meeting.

In one of the break-outs, the practice of expelling youngsters from schools was discussed. This makes youngsters feel like they are disposable. Moreover, they will get a reputation, which stigmatises them and might create a vicious circle. It was suggested to have more discussions about this topic.

Further reading

The EUROGUIDE Project created an extensive handbook and an online training for teachers about dealing religious and socio-political arguments in schools. It provides concrete examples of different ideologies, topics and possible ways to act. The handbook is available in Dutch, French, Hungarian, Italian and Swedish.