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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Youth & Education (Y&E)

5-6 October, Digital event

Education and Youth Work: Working with Community Figures both Inside and Outside Schools

Introduction

The involvement and the support of communities are fundamental in the prevention of radicalisation. In addition to schools and youth work organisations, young people are also exposed to various other influential environments like their family or religious community. These environments can serve as both protective factors (in their search for identity) or as risk factors (in proclaiming problematic narratives). What's more, key figures in these environments might be able to reach young people more effectively than teachers or social workers because of their function as role models.

At RAN Youth & Education, we try to emphasise the importance of [collaboration within the pedagogical environment](#) in order to create a positive and inclusive community around young people. Therefore, we also want to explore the role and value of these community figures within such collaborative structures. During this RAN Y&E Working Group meeting, we invited practitioners from youth work, schools, and community representatives to share their experiences and expertise regarding this topic.

The meeting included three break-out sessions in which participants discussed specific questions related to the topic. On the first day, participants explored the relevance of working together with community figures in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) and formulated various challenges they encounter. Solutions to these challenges were formulated on the second day. This paper will present these topics in the same order: first, the value of collaboration, followed by the challenges and solutions.

Highlights of the discussion

This RAN Youth & Education meeting was attended by practitioners in youth work and education, as well as several religious figures and community representatives. While some had prior experience in collaborating with other actors, some found this new and challenging. Overall, participants appreciated the value of working together with community figures, and identified various benefits of this collaboration.

To categorise the benefits based on the different levels of prevention, we introduced the prevention pyramid framework of Johan Deklerck ⁽¹⁾. We made a distinction between efforts trying to improve the general wellbeing, on the one hand (primary prevention), and efforts trying to detect concerning behaviour of vulnerable youngsters, on the other hand (secondary prevention).

The relevance of this collaboration for the prevention of radicalisation

Value of collaborating with community figures when working on the breeding ground of radicalisation:

- By connecting different people who play a role in the lives of the children (teachers and school counsellors, youth workers, parents, religious community representatives), a community is formed around the children. This can have a positive impact and fosters **a sense of belonging and feeling included** in society.
- Children spend more time in their community than in school or at youth organisations. By collaborating with communities, teachers and youth workers gain a better understanding of what the youngsters have to deal with in daily life. Partners need to look at the child more **holistically** in the whole of their environment and build bridges to make sure the messages a child receives reflect the shared values.
- Children can have the feeling that their background and identity are not seen or valued in school. By working together with, for example, imams, priests or other civil society figures, students might feel more accepted and education becomes more **inclusive**.
- Parents expect a lot from schools, while some students might not be open to suggestions from school teachers. Community figures might know better how to talk and connect with the children. They could function as **role models** and have a similar ethical frame of reference (within the boundaries of democratic values).
- Children live in multiple bubbles and receive information from different angles. Messages on delicate topics might differ between these environments, resulting in a 'conflict of interest' where they do not know what to believe and become insecure or frustrated. Communication between these environments might foster consensus about these topics, but **collaboration beforehand** is needed to have constructive pluralistic conversations with the focus to develop shared values.

Value of collaborating with community figures when working with vulnerable individuals and groups:

- Children who do not show up or are unreachable for schools or youth work might be **approachable** by community figures. When this collaboration is already established and nourished, and trust between the actors is built, teachers or youth workers are able to connect with these figures to create a support network in the neighbourhood around the child.

⁽¹⁾ See also: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices-54_en

- If, for example, schools and community figures already collaborate and have a trust-based partnership, it is easier to **share signals** of concerning behaviour or possible radicalisation between these parties. Parties can more adequately react together than individually.

Challenges and recommendations

As described in previous RAN papers, schools, youth work organisations and communities can play an important role in binding youth to a democratic society ⁽²⁾. Radicalisation can be prevented when young people feel part of society. To attain this goal and strengthen social capital, the different parties must work together. However, schools, youth work organisations and community figures can face several challenges when they collaborate. RAN Y&E participants attending this meeting identified challenges and together they worked on possible solutions.

Challenge 1: How to find the right community figures to work with? Who represents the community you want to reach out to? Who is a credible messenger able to connect with the youngsters and promotes a message based on shared values?

For some communities, it is difficult to select who to work with because there are many possible representatives. So you ask: Who is the most suited and reliable for the job? For other communities, you might know they exist, but you don't have an idea who represents them, and you wonder how do you find people in the first place.

Solutions:

- Collaborate with local authorities to **map existing networks**, both online and offline. Tap into these networks, and identify the key representatives to connect with. These networks could be religiously homogeneous or more heterogeneous intercultural networks. **To build your own network of various community figures**, together with the local authority, you could bring together various community representatives and develop such an intercommunal network. However, keep in mind that building partnerships is an evolving process and needs continuous efforts.
- To start the collaboration, it is recommended to make use of an expert **mediator who is acquainted with the dynamics and background of the community**. The aim is to facilitate access to these networks and help identify the key figures. In some countries, there are national networks of religious experts that could support in identifying the right people (when connecting to religious communities).
- **Start practical and small to explore who are the community figures you need and wish to connect to.** Involve the young people who could benefit from this community engagement, and let them organise a small-scale meeting with a local community figure. Together with this expert mediator, it is possible to evaluate how they interact with each other, and possibly detect problematic narratives. The following two questions are crucial: "Is this person a credible voice for young people?" and "Is the message he/she spreads based on common shared values?". Keep in mind that you can never remove all risks and we cannot feel a connection with everyone.

Challenge 2: How to build trust in a collaborative structure so all parties involved can openly share their concerns?

Building trust is a process that takes time. To foster fruitful collaboration, the involved parties must be willing to open up and trust each other. In this case, each partner can honestly voice concerns or grievances. How can we build trust?

⁽²⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021). [Education and youth work: towards an effective collaboration.](#); Radicalisation Awareness Network (2018). [Engaging with communities, collaboration between local authorities and communities in PVE.](#)

Solutions:

- Start small and address **easy topics** first, such as the playground or school canteen, and define common goals around these topics. Address more delicate issues gradually. Throughout the process, make sure you communicate well and engage in an honest and **empathic dialogue**.
- Make clear that the **common goal** of all parties is a happy and successful child. Focus on that goal instead of 'preventing radicalisation', which might make some parties rather defensive.
- Set up a **clear plan** together, concentrate on what works and get rid of what doesn't. This requires frequent monitoring and evaluation.

Challenge 3: How to deal with conflicts between value and ethos? How to formulate shared values and common goals?

Some actors might be rather distant in their (pedagogical) beliefs and practices, or have certain misconceptions about others. While they might have similar goals, they have different ideas about how to get there. Is it possible that these diverging views don't hinder the collaboration process?

Solutions:

- Initially, partners might have a different agenda. Keep focusing on building trust and formulating the common goal of a **happy successful child**. Build the network around the pedagogical principles you can agree on.
- Be **patient** and clarify misunderstandings, do not ignore them when it becomes sensitive or uncomfortable.
- Ask someone from the community itself to explain your point of view, or use mediation if needed. Also, be open to the other partners' point of view and try to reach a consensus. Without **listening** to the other, you will never be able to eventually bring across your message.

Challenge 4: Which communities are important when working on the prevention of right-wing extremism, hybrid conspiracies, or Covid-19 induced radicalisation?

When working with communities on the primary prevention level, it is hard to point out where to find certain communities. However, if you wish to collaborate with a religious community, places of worship are clear gathering points you could reach out to, such as Mosques or Churches. However, if you wish to collaborate with communities formed around a specific ideology, where do you find them? And how do you keep track of developments within evolving ideologies and communities?

Solutions:

- As a school or youth work organisation you need to know your local area, you need to know your communities to address the issues. Be a **community (both off and online) sensitive**, who are the youngsters in the schools, what communities are they part of? What are the social issues in the community? Knowing your neighbourhood will make it easier to identify the right community figures and the places where to find them to prevent possible radicalisation inspired by any type of extremist ideology.
- If communities do not gather in any specific place, connect to places in your neighbourhood where people get together, such as **sports clubs, youth clubs, bars, and online spaces**. Next RAN meeting will focus on how to engage with sport clubs in order to foster inclusion.

General recommendations

Throughout the meeting, various general recommendations came up about how to foster collaboration between schools and/or youth work with community figures.

- Collaborate with **local authorities** to connect with the right partners. Together, you can develop a multi-faith and inter-cultural network of community experts that represent many of the communities that the children in your school/youth work organisation belong to.
- Ask an **expert mediator** to find the right community figures to collaborate with. This mediator could be an expert who is able to connect to a specific local community and understand the context of this community figure, based on his/her background and professional experience.
- In the absence of an established network of community figures/experts, **start small** by organising a meet-up between young people and a community figure, to evaluate how they interact with each other. Is this person a credible voice for young people? Is the message he/she spreads based on common shared values? Make use of the expert mediator to evaluate this process together.
- When starting a collaboration with community figures, first address some **easy topics** together, such as the playground and school canteen, and define **common goals**.
- Take the **time** to build a meaningful relationship. You need trust for the partnership to work effectively and this can take time.

Instead of using the term democratic values, use the term **shared values**. This immediately focuses on the connections and similarities instead of the differences.

Relevant practices

1. The CCA method: A secondary school, Go! Atheneum, in Antwerp has started a collaboration with Ceapire, a Centre of Expertise, in the area of intervention and prevention of radicalisation and extremism. Ceapire is made up of theologians, psychologists and a range of other experienced experts in the field, whom the school collaborates with to connect with their students, and the communities these students belong to. The essence of their approach is the strategic use of three co-developed strategies: 1) A Connective Narrative – a story with the focus on shared values and connecting with students and pupils for the first time. 2) A Counter-Narrative – to counter a substantive standpoint via a contextual and/or historical standpoint. 3) Alternative pathways provided by civic activities and art projects at school.

Follow up

Several questions raised during the meeting require follow-up.

- **How can we build a trustful collaborative structure in which it is also clear when authorities need to be informed?** *At a certain point of time, one or more partners might notice worrying behaviour among a pupil. Because of different interests, partners might not agree or not know surely when to involve and inform authorities. How do you make clear agreements on this?*
- **What is the best way to share information on individual cases between schools/youth work and community figures?**

Further reading

- [EUROGUIDE](#)
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021). [Education and youth work: towards an effective collaboration](#), Conclusion Paper. Digital meeting, 8-9 April 2021.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2020). [Dealing with the Co-existence of Formal and Non-formal Education](#), Conclusion Paper. Digital meeting, 4-5 November 2020.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2018). [Engaging with communities in P/CVE](#), Ex Post Paper. Berlin, Germany: RAN Centre of Excellence, 28 September 2018.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2018). [Engaging with communities, collaboration between local authorities and communities in PVE](#), Ex Post Paper. Prague, Czech Republic: RAN Centre of Excellence, 22-23 February 2018.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2016). [How to cooperate with religious organisations and communities within the local approach to radicalisation?](#), Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: RAN Centre of Excellence, 8 December 2016.