

EX POST PAPER

Drop-outs and going back to school

Introduction

Adapting a school to the multi-cultural and socio-political world in which its children find themselves is key in preventing students from dropping out and radicalising. Both early school-leaving and radicalisation are the result of underlying processes, perceived marginalisation and/or alienation. Failing to adapt the school can lead to the students losing faith in education institutions. Consequently, this also challenges the students trust in fundamental values like democracy, role of law and civil liberties. The perceived daily reality in schools can be the solution for the above challenges, but can also be one of the push factors for radicalisation.

Schools can play an important role in offering people a chance to return to 'normality' after choosing to abandon an extremist environment, for instance the returnees from the so-called daesh, but also right-wing extremist milieus.

Challenges in regards to dropouts

The Paris Declaration (March 2015) urged schools to increase their involvement in the urgent task of prevention and countering of violent extremism (PVE¹/CVE). Eight months later, the European Ministers of Youth and Education the EU's 'Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council', met in Luxembourg (23 November 2015). In a report by the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU², dropouts and radicalisation was a headline topic:

*“By **combatting school dropout rates**, by offering greater scope for youth political participation, by fostering academic achievement for children from migrant backgrounds, by targeting young migrants using youth-work tools, by providing quality support from a very early age aimed at preparing all children for the challenges of school, by imparting European values to young people, by ensuring education in citizenship and social cohesion, we have the means to **prevent the radicalisation and marginalisation of so many young people**,’ stated Claude Meisch. He stressed that European education systems must **‘adapt to a multicultural situation’**, recalling that it is often children from migrant backgrounds that are at risk of leaving school without high school diplomas and of ending up unemployed.*

(...)

*The French Minister for National Education, Higher Education and Research, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, speaking alongside the Luxembourg Minister at the press conference, recalled that **schools should do their utmost to ‘prevent the temptation of radicalisation and ensure that [...] social cohesion and the values of liberty, equality and fraternity still mean something’**. She stressed that education and training should provide a **‘bulwark against fanaticism and a vector for openness, mutual respect, and fraternity’**. She again referred to the implementation of the Declaration of Paris on promoting citizenship education and common values of liberty, tolerance and non-discrimination, adopted on 17 March 2015 by 26 European education ministers.”*

Contributing to exit projects is the second challenge for education. This challenge is becoming increasingly apparent now that the geopolitical situation in the Middle East is changing. With the shrinking of the so-called Caliphate’s territory, some of the thousands of European men and women who travelled there could return to Europe, with or without their partner and/or children. Some will be detained for security reasons, but probably not all. Europe needs to prepare to engage with them, and for the inevitable challenges involved in re-socialisation and re-integration. Helping them to finish their education or offering job training is considered an important component of this engagement.

¹ CVE is countering violent extremism. PVE is the prevention of violent extremism

² <http://www.eu2015lu.eu/en/actualites/articles-actualite/2015/11/23-conseil-eycs-education-jeunesse/index.html>

This ex post paper looks into two questions:

1. The link between preventing individuals from dropping out of school, and preventing radicalisation;
2. The role of schools in facilitating a return to school once an individual has decided to abandon an extremist ideology or group – and the challenges involved in this.

Does lowering dropout numbers prevent radicalisation?

During the RAN EDU meeting in Paris (28-29 September 2017), an experienced exit worker from Germany explained the risk of radicalisation with the following formula, based on his experience with right-wing extremists:

time + emotional need + meeting radicalised people = opportunity for radicalisation

So, the risk of radicalisation is higher when people who have dropped out of school:

- have nothing to do with their time;
- have a susceptible mindset; and,
- are living in an area where they meet the wrong people.

A logical strategy to avoid such a scenario is keeping youngsters in school. It is commonly believed that the more years spent in school the better. Nonetheless, simply being at school is not enough. Teachers frequently witness students in their classrooms who are physically there, but whose hearts and minds have already dropped out.

When this happens, the teacher can play a vital role in finding a way into the hearts and minds of these potential dropouts. And this situation can also be seen as an opportunity to increase critical thinking, decrease vulnerability and boost mental resilience.

Simply forcing a teenager to attend school when he or she is not interested can, in some cases, become a triggers or push factor leading to radicalisation. Within the RAN community of practitioners, there isn't much discussion about the fact that the root causes for extremism are many³. Nor is there much debate about how perceived injustice and grievances, alongside the absence of a sense of belonging, are key push factors. These negative perceptions and emotions can stem from major or minor events at school. The school system, with its established rules and culture, often feeds these emotions.

But rules can be bent to the advantage of everyone. A simple but effective example was presented at the RAN EDU meeting. An art teacher asked his students to paint a portrait. A Muslim student didn't wish to complete the assignment, because of his religious beliefs. The teacher at first responded by giving him a low grade, but was advised by an external actor to take a different approach. The teacher agreed and introduced the student to calligraphy. By changing the assignment, a potential

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf

conflict was avoided and the student developed a sense of respect and appreciation toward the teacher.

This example introduces the element of religion and identity at school. The role of religion in education varies substantially around Europe. Some schools forbid headscarves, while in others, both students and teachers wear them. In some countries, all signs of religion are considered a personal matter, and are not permitted in school. This includes Christian crucifixes. If we accept that the interpretation of religion plays an influential role in the path to radicalisation, and is followed by students, schools and teachers, then schools should be allowed and equipped to address religious interpretations so that they are potentially more effective in countering extremism.

Student - teacher relationship

Nouwen et al⁴ showed that engagement at school, a sense of belonging and well-being are all influenced strongly by a student’s perception of how supportive the teacher is. The teacher can have a very significant role in both the processes of dropping out, and in preventing radicalisation.

Merton⁵ described education as one of the most important institutions for upward social mobility. When schools are not perceived as facilitators of upward mobility, students can either change their goals or change the way they try to reach their goals. How do people respond to a disjunction of goals and means? Merton creates a typology of adaptations. The first symbol designates people's relationship to norms about goals; the second symbol designates their relationship to norms about the means of achieving those goals.

Mode of adaptation

	Upward social mobility as goal	School as the means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	x	x

In this diagram, a ‘+’ indicates acceptance, a ‘-’ signifies rejection, and an ‘x’ indicates rejection of prevailing values and substitution of new ones.

From the table, we can build five possible response options:

- 1) Conformism: despite frustrations, the person continues to believe in upward social mobility and school.
- 2) Innovation: the person wants success, but does not regard school as the only way to achieve this (e.g. crime is also an option).

⁴ The role of religiosity in students’ perception of student-teacher relations, school belonging and valuing of education. Ward Nouwen, Rut van Caudenberg & Noel Clycq, University of Antwerp. To be published.

⁵ Social structure and anomy, R.K. Merton American sociological review 3 (5) 1938

- 3) Ritualism: the student does not really believe school will help, but attends.
- 4) Retreatism: the individual does not believe in social mobility, nor in school supporting social mobility.
- 5) Rebellion: the person rebels against culturally dominant goals and replaces them with alternative goal-setting and alternative means to achieve them.

One could say that the five different anomies are ordered from 'less' to 'more' susceptible or vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment. And in some cases, rebellion may even coincide with one of the phases of radicalisation, from exploratory to flirting with radical ideas to starting to radicalise or being radicalised and even extremist.

Nouwens et.al. suggest that if schools reproduce existing inequalities – perceived by ethnic and/or religious minorities in Western European societies – feelings of anomie and strain might be expected, while youngsters may turn away from both the school's goals and the school itself as a means to achieving a goal. It is a challenge and a huge responsibility to adapt a school in such a way that it can prevent and manage Merton's five different anomies.

Preventing youngsters from dropping out of school is not new to the RAN EDU agenda. For instance, the 2013 final report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School leaving advises: flexible education, training staff, and ensuring a relevant and engaging curriculum, flexible educational paths, smooth transition between education types, good vocational education, the involvement of pupils and parents in school decision making, and mentoring. These counsels are in line with RAN EDU recommendations on the fundamental approaches needed to create a school that prevents radicalisation.

The relationship between CVE/PVE policies and school dropout rates

CVE and PVE policies can have either a negative or positive impact in schools – both in terms of dropping out and resilience against radicalisation and recruitment.

The very existence of a policy to counter violent extremism can lead to certain attitudes and behaviour by school staff that in turn result in more dropouts and a higher risk of radicalisation. Schools in the UK have a statutory duty⁶ to play a role in safeguarding students from being drawn into terrorism. They must refer people they are concerned about. Such a policy or related legislation *can* mean much higher numbers of young people being safeguarded from malicious recruitment and extremist exploitation. It does this by creating more awareness, providing broader information towards school staff, parents and students themselves, and it can be combined with detailed training for specific teams, led by the school principals.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance>

The teacher's approach and therefore the students' reactions all depend on whether the school staff are properly trained, and how they deal with making referrals. If, as a result of the previously mentioned legislation, teachers look at their pupils with a mental framework of suspicion – or even think it is their task to monitor and observe pupils so as to protect society – it might harm the teacher-student relationship. If students feel that there is less room for critical or even radical views, they may lose faith in schools as supportive agents for societal success. PVE doesn't necessarily have to result in a worsening of the student-teacher relationship, but there is a risk when introduced inappropriately or without instruction.

CVE and PVE interventions can however also play a positive role. Both PVE and CVE support and empower teachers and schools, helping them to recognise vulnerable youngsters and prevent the radicalisation of those for whom they are responsible. Teachers might feel insecure about this new phenomenon called 'radicalisation', or about their role and contribution. PVE training programmes and support structures can help teachers to return to normal. 'Normal' implies confident teachers interacting with all students in a human way and teaching them to deal with adversaries and perceptions of injustice and marginalisation.

The role of schools in facilitating a return to school once an individual has decided to abandon an extremist ideology or group

Some of those integrated into an extremist environment might be looking for a way out. Once they do leave, former extremists belong to one of several groups requiring resocialisation as they try to 'go back to normal' and start a new life. Returning to school or starting vocational training is often a natural step for those who want to leave the extremist environment behind and invest in a new future. The best results follow when people launch such projects voluntarily, because they are motivated. This has been underlined in previous RAN DERAD and [RAN EXIT](#) papers. It is also underlined in a well-respected document about [Right wing extremism in Europe](#) by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.⁷



“In good-practice anti-hate crime and deradicalization interventions, participants enroll on a voluntary basis only. Such programs work best with those who are genuinely motivated to take part. Hence, participation must be freely chosen, rather than assigned, coerced, or mandated, and dropping out must neither be held against clients nor go on their records in any way.”

⁷ Right wing extremism in Europe, Ralf Melzer, Sebastian Serafi (Eds.), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/dialog/10031.pdf>

Dealing with minors (under 18) returning from Syria and Iraq, and who need to go back to school, is a relatively recent challenge. A small RAN EDU group looked into this topic, feeding into the RAN Manual *Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*.⁸ The Manual lists three priorities returnee children:

1. focus on early intervention and normalisation;
2. holistic, multi-agency approach;
3. tailor-made approach based on individual risk and needs assessment.

When sending young returnees back to school, it is important to recognise that all have been exposed to some extent to a certain level of violence and influence. Under daesh, children receive ideological training from the age of nine, and boys even receive weapons training. In Aarhus (DK), a screening tool for different age groups is under development:

- 9 months – 1 year
- 1-6 years
- 6-12 years
- 12-18 years

When a teacher meets a student with an extremist worldview

If a youngster who has more or less turned his or her back on extremist ideology is brought back to school, his or her teachers might expect some challenging encounters. In some cases, it might be difficult for a teacher to set aside personal feelings and remain professional. Participants at the Paris meeting benefitted from the presence of several exit workers, who are familiar with such situations. One exit worker offered a six-point for those working with right-wing extremists and people leaning towards right-wing extremist beliefs⁹. This document is based on experiences on dealing with sects¹⁰

1. I cannot change a right-wing extremist/person oriented towards right-wing extremist beliefs. All I can do is change my behaviour towards this person.
2. I will show the right-wing extremist/person oriented towards right wing extremist beliefs that I accept him/her as a fellow human being even though I do not share the ideologies in which he or she believes.
3. I cannot attack a concrete ideology, which might be viewed as fortress in a hostile world. I must always adapt my methods to new situations.
4. A right-wing extremist/person oriented towards right-wing extremist beliefs does not accept criticism with respect to the beliefs they uphold. Members of the scene consider their beliefs to be absolute, i.e. there is only right or wrong. By making brief, critical remarks, I am supporting this person's ability to think critically, which he or she does only in a latent fashion.

⁸ The chapter on child returnees starts on p. 67. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf

⁹ Shared by Jump at the RAN EDU meeting 28-29 September 2017 in Paris

¹⁰ <http://www.sektenausstieg.net/sekten/382-regeln-zum-umgang-mit-sektierern-in-der-eigenen-familie>

5. I will support any contact opportunities that arise between a right-wing extremist/person oriented towards right-wing extremist beliefs and the outside world. The scene sees everything in black and white. A positive encounter with the outside world can rupture the perspective painted by the scene and can threaten the ideology.
6. People become part of an extremist scene when they are in a phase where they don't see alternatives in life. They will only leave the scene when presented with alternatives. To support those wanting to drop out, present them with an alternative that is not only tolerable, but also – despite any difficulties – fascinating.

The RAN Manual *Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families* offers guidance for schools who work with returnees. One of the key recommendations is that staff need training. At least two levels of training should be available:

- 1) Basic awareness training for practitioners in (direct) contact with child returnees (e.g. school teachers, social workers, members of leisure organisations). This basic training could cover, as a minimum requirement:
 - a) information about the situation in Syria / Iraq to which these children have been exposed;
 - b) basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;
 - c) information on how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.
- 2) In-depth training and shared learning sessions for practitioners directly and closely involved in cases of child returnees (e.g. child protection services, family support professionals, local police officers, psychologists). This in-depth training could include lessons on foster care and reintegration into schools.

Lessons learned – what can you do?

1. A focus on early intervention and normalisation

For the best possible results in terms of resocialising returnee children into Western society, begin by normalising children's day-to-day lives and socialising them into an appropriate social network as soon as possible after their arrival. Children will benefit from a structured 'normal' and safe environment in which they can interact with their peers at day care or school. General criminology research has shown that children who commit a crime before the age of 12 are more likely to be persistent offenders. Although these findings are not necessarily related to violence – and there is no known research about children growing up in terrorist-claimed territory – it should be considered an impetus for early intervention (meaning as soon as possible when the child returns).

2. A holistic, multi-agency approach

No single service can provide the holistic response needed to work with child returnees. When designing a national and local response to child returnees, a multi-agency is necessary to address the personal, familial and social needs of the child. In general, such an approach will involve: law

enforcement agencies, child services, social care services, local authorities, schools, health services, prison and probation-related services (e.g. when parents are in prison), employment services, sports and leisure organisations, religious and charity organisations, among others.

3 A tailor-made approach based on individual risk and needs assessment

The risk and needs assessment should reflect that each case has its own background, dynamics, risks and opportunities for rehabilitation. These cases therefore require a tailor-made approach, involving relevant actors, as mentioned above.

4 Normalisation as the guiding principle

The main objective – when dealing with returnees in educational settings – is to ‘return to normal’ as soon as possible. Schools should provide a safe and regulated space, where the child or youngster feels supported, where there are structure and rules, and where stress is alleviated. The risk of the pupil being seen as ‘different’ should be minimised. This raises the usual question on the amount and type of information available to school staff. We RAN EDU would recommend adopting a ‘shared secret’ practice, involving only some members of the staff, as nominated by the school principal.

5 Dealing with potential risks posed by child returnees

Background and personal experiences may lead to concerns about child returnees posing a risk to other children at the school; while unlikely, an awareness of trauma reactions (such as acting up and, in a minority of cases, interpersonal violence) and preparedness for dealing with these reactions should be part of the training process for teachers. As stated previously, a risk and needs assessment should be carried out before bringing the child into an educational environment.

6 Schools should encourage children to develop ideas and responsibility

Children should be supported in becoming positive members of the school community. But they also need to be given the right opportunities if they are to be successful. This is even more important for children who perceive injustice and are angry or concerned about developments in their personal lives and in the world. Dealing with anger and perceived grievances and injustice is crucial to resilience against extremism. School projects encouraging children to participate in a certain way at school and take responsibility can be very helpful in empowering them and boosting their self-confidence (e.g. art mediation projects).+

7 Overcome the reluctance in some schools to take in child returnees

Reluctance to take in child returnees can stem from a fear that extremist ideas may spread within the school, or even that a terrorist act may be committed. The resulting fears could create tensions in the school and wider communities. To overcome these challenges, a person/authority who is accepted and trusted by school managers should be appointed to discuss, convince and negotiate with schools about cooperation.

8 Information sharing on the arrival of a child returnee

It is important that a child does not arrive at the school unannounced. The school principal should be informed, and the school should follow its usual child protection procedures. While there might be some benefits to sharing information with the wider staff, this could lead to bias and stigmatisation, which hinders the normalisation process. It may be useful to have conversations with the family on what information should be shared with whom. For the wellbeing and integration of the child, it is important that all those sharing information have the same goal.

9 Schools should pay extra attention to how the new child is doing

The school's administration should make sure the child receives special attention, and that they are kept informed of the child's activities and wellbeing. The administration can ask questions of the staff, personally engage with the child or have a staff member monitor the child closely.

10 Develop a support structure for schools

A support structure for schools is needed to ensure that it is clear to all who can be relied upon when responding to child returnees. For multi-agency cooperation, schools should cooperate with partners in childcare, social care, the police, mental health services (including for trauma), physical health services, youth work organisations, NGOs with relevant expertise, and those organising after-school activities.

11 Provide for an intermediate period of readjustment for the child

An intermediate period might help the child to start (over) in the school system (after having lived in a completely different setting). This period should be as short as possible. In some countries, legislation/the system's set-up require children to enter the school system immediately. During the readjustment period, it is important to build up trust and find a connection with the child and his/her family. During this period, a risk and needs assessment should be performed (think also of tests for language, psychological well-being and intellectual ability).

12 Find a good fit between the returnee child and the school

Some schools may be a better fit for some children than for others. The authority responsible for schools, or a specialised centre, could play a key role in identifying the most suitable schools. Those schools identified as a good fit should be given extra training, support and funding. Returning to the old environment and former school might not benefit the child or his/her family. Relocation is in the child's interests, so that he or she – and the rest of the family – can make a new start without stigmatisation or admiration. Registering these children in schools located near the sites of previous attacks is not advisable due to the presence of traumatised or victimised children and staff.

13 Dealing with publicity and press reactions

Schools need to know that if they take in a returnee, this might result in unwanted publicity and tensions within the (school) community. Parents, press and politicians might start asking questions and raise concerns. A strategy is needed for this, and must make confidentiality paramount.

14 Creating access to expertise on trauma and extremism

Although school staff are in general trained to deal with vulnerable children, some additional training on extremism and the circumstances in which child returnees have lived is advisable. The school should also have access to an expert team on these topics for help and support in challenging situations.