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At the forefront of prevention work: How schools in Europe can contribute to effective radicalisation prevention¹

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An overwhelming majority of Islamists living in Europe start to radicalise between their mid-teens and mid-thirties. Many still go to school or just have left school when they turn towards radical ideologies. Jihadi travellers who ventured to war zones in the Middle East from Germany are a telling example: A 2016 analysis security agencies performed on biographies of 784 of a total of 1.050 Germans who had reinforced the ranks of Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq showed 486 individuals were aged between 18 and 25 years and 56 under 18 years at the time of their first departure. Moreover, 69 individuals were still minors when starting to radicalise and 72 were attending school until just right before they departed (BKA, BfV, and HKE, 2016).

Socio-demographic figures of Jihadi travellers from other EU member states will, most likely, look similar to those from Germany. It is, thus, reasonable to say European schools are a core area to prevent critical radicalisation of young people. In the following sections, we are going to present three lessons learnt from research on Islamist radicalisation prevention work in schools. Although these insights are mainly extracted from the German context and European schools systems are highly different we consider they can be adapted to the specific realities and necessities of other member states.

Strengthening prevention architecture

Retrospective research into biographies of radicalised school shooters and Islamist terrorist attackers confirmed a variety of people in their social environment –i.e. peers and parents, but also school personnel– to a certain extent had noticed signs of radicalisation or psychosocial crises the individuals were

trapped in *before* they turned into perpetrators of violent acts (Böckler et al., 2018). However, those fragments of information in none of the cases were pieced together into one picture, so their real escalation level was never understood completely. In schools, important pieces of knowledge very often get lost over their complex organisational structures and demanding working routines, or reach recipients incompletely – phenomena well known as information loss or fragmentation (Fox and Harding, 2005). As a result, critical psychosocial developments in students' lives are identified too late or remain completely out of teachers' sight. For that reason, it is vital, also from a health promotion perspective, to integrate standardised structures for case-specific prevention work into schools' internal operational architectures.

Strengthening external networks

Although teachers' primary task is knowledge transfer, as a matter of fact they have to engage also in social work as they are frequently confronted with a great variety of societal challenges, including radicalisation. As our own research has been able to confirm school personnel very often lack in-depth knowledge about signs and behaviours that might indicate radicalisation or psychosocial crises in adolescents. This is a worrying gap as they are at the forefront to support adolescents in critical phases of their development.

Despite these shortcomings, it is also clear that effective management of radicalisation cases cannot be guaranteed by schools alone as it simply exceeds their capacities. Involving external specialists such as counselling centres for radicalisation, psychologists, or religious

communities is vital to increase the effectiveness of prevention interventions.

Strengthening prevention effectiveness through evaluation

In recent years, projects to prevent Islamist radicalisation hit the ceiling. In Germany, for example, the *Demokratie Leben*-programme – by far the biggest state programme to fund prevention interventions – operates with an annual budget of more than 100 million euros and has financed several hundred projects. In sharp contrast to the resources available today for radicalisation prevention work, approaches that have proven through robust scientific evaluation studies they are, in fact, effective remain relatively scarce (Kober, 2017). With regard to Germany, again, renowned data bases such as *Wespe* or *Grüne Liste Prävention* still register a relatively small number of radicalisation prevention measures whose effectiveness has been underpinned by scientific scrutiny.

Policy Recommendations

For prevention work in schools to become more effective policy makers in the EU should consider promoting the following measures:

- To find out about critical developments in students and initiate measures to support them as early as possible it is strongly advised educational institutions are furnished with a comprehensive prevention
- In order to increase school personnel's capacities to support prevention work specific training on psychosocial crises in adolescence and radicalisation should be incorporated as a compulsory standard into the education curricula for teachers.
- It is highly important that radicalisation prevention interventions developed for educational institutions undergo scientific scrutiny in order to guarantee cases are dealt with effectively. Effectiveness evaluations should be a standard practice whenever launching new or extending already existing programmes.
- At the same time, educational institutions should be actively supported to build and nurse support networks with external prevention and radicalisation specialists.

architecture. Such structures should not be implemented through a merely security lens to detect students who might become a risk for safety in schools, but rather adopt a public health perspective, as schools could contribute considerably to identify vulnerable students and support them in their psychosocial development. However, it is imperative to avoid creating double and triple structures. The NETWASS and NETWAVE programmes developed by FUB are a good practices example for such a prevention structure.

Consulted & Recommended Sources

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