

The role of schools in tackling the problem of radicalization

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With the quest for meaning of life and orientation being indicative for youth-age, young people tend to affiliate to groups offering clear and simple approaches. Therefore, most of the recruitment strategies of extremist groups target young people, who are most at risk to radicalize. In this context, schools are important not only because young people spend a large amount of their time in school, but also because schools are per se actors in the field of political education and democracy building. Schools can contribute tremendously to prevent liberticidal and anti-democratic ideologies if they focus not only on cognitive skills, but also on socio-emotional skills. It is very important to enable the young to become active global citizens and to realize the advantages of a democratic society. Therefore, educators should empower them and make them capable of facing challenges that may have a negative impact on their well-being – emotionally and physically. One of the key aims of education should be to build resilience among young people and to foster a positive sense of identity and belonging. In terms of a universal prevention it is also of importance to raise the awareness of adolescents regarding the simplistic views of extremists. To foster respect for diversity, pluralism and ambiguity and to develop value-based positions is one main objective of prevention of radicalization. Emphasizing diversity may promote a respectful togetherness and protect the young from stereotypes, ideologies of inequality and collective identity. Schools do not have the task to identify individuals who might radicalize in future as there are no definite signs that indicate how much a person is at risk. It is important not to create a culture of suspicion in the classroom or to stigmatize certain groups or people. Interactions with the pupils should be based on sensitivity instead of alarmism. Despite all uncertainties and open questions, a tenor like “the kids are all right” should dominate while working with them.

It is of great significance that schools provide space for young people where they can ask their questions about religion, identity and belonging, especially in heterogenous groups. Particularly in a globalized classroom it's urgently needed that teachers are providing room for such questions as “Who am I?” and “To whom do I belong?”. In doing so, they can open up new perspectives and trigger new thoughts. If this is not the case, there might be others to fill the vacuum and offer easy solutions and answers. To be able to develop thoughts and to express them protects the young from simplistic and exclusionary world views as well as from simplistic explanatory models that tolerate violence. Instead of telling them how they should live, educators should ask them how they want to live and motivate them to advocate their positions. Signals of acceptance, appreciation and belonging as well as true and honest interest in the thoughts of a young person are the best prevention as well as democracy education. Many children and adolescents are very sensitive regarding the use of language, especially

regarding arguments that cover topics of “us” against “them”. Particularly young people with migrant background or Muslims should be signaled by language that they belong and are naturally acknowledged as a part of Germany – especially in school. Accordingly, teachers should be sensitized for these topics, and also being called upon to reflect their own perspectives.

Teachers who perceive questionable behavior patterns or expressions in their class, as for example a forceful claim of exclusive truths that legitimize hatred and the use of violence, liberticidal, anti-democratic or anti-pluralistic attitudes or the devaluation of others should immediately start a discussion about that. Even though some statements may cause the reflex to contradict the adolescent immediately, it is important to show them that they are also accepted in their fear or anger. Only if that is the case, adolescents might - in a next step - be able to question their black and white thinking and their enemy stereotype and start to think critically. It's very important for young people who express themselves contemptuously to understand that various kinds of discrimination - as sexism, ableism, homophobia, antisemitism and islamophobia - are based on the same mechanisms. If they learn to understand that, they may become self-critical regarding their own discriminating behavior.

One organization following this approach in Germany is *ufuq.de*, which works at the interface between political education, pedagogy and science. Amongst other things they provide peer-teamed workshops in secondary schools and youth institutions in whole Germany that make the question “How do we want to live?” a subject of discussion. Main goal of the workshops is to encourage a reflected self-concept and a more constructive dealing with religious and non-religious values and norms, as well as to offer alternatives to Islamist and anti-Islamic world views. The workshops do not focus on a certain selected number or branch of school as this would be counteractive to an approach of universal prevention in the sense of political education. As biographies show, radicalization concerns young people of all backgrounds and ages. The workshops are tailor-made offers for the specific needs and composition of each group. To ensure an open and target-group specific approach, a continuous evaluation and modification of content and form is required.

The work of *ufuq.de* and all the other providers who develop and road-test prevention approaches contribute immensely to the prevention of radicalization of young people. However, it only makes sense to bring off new projects and approaches if institutions such as schools have the resources to implement the lessons learned long-term into their own everyday life. Schools need more staff and more time – both is missing in the current school routine.

It's a certain kind of politicking to fund large-scaled prevention programs with limited duration instead of equipping all schools with more staff. Unfortunately the message that more teaching positions will be created does not gain as much attention as an “anti-radicalization-program”. Politics should not miss to invest sustainably into the everyday school life.