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Identity Development

**PREVENT
RADICALISATION
THROUGH
IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT**



BEYOND LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG MIGRANTS AT SCHOOL

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THE (PR)IDE PROJECT

We are two teachers who have been a part of the (PR)IDE Erasmus+ project. We have worked with about 30 students, which were the students we were teaching in the subject Swedish as a Second Language, SVA, when the project started. The students were in the ages 16-20. The time they had been in Sweden differed. Most of them came to Sweden as refugees. In these two classes there were a mix of different nationalities. They had come from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Syria.

Besides working with different activities with our students, our part of the project has been to write an article about how schools could work to prevent radicalisation among young people. We have also carried out some of our teaching activities with the youths from the other project partners during a learning activity in Berlin.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we will discuss how the school could work to prevent radicalisation among young people. The school's part in this work differs much from non-formal youth work. We have the benefit of meeting most youth in the society. But in school there is a curriculum decided by the government, that we must follow. We also grade the students according to this curriculum. So, the relation between the students and the teacher will differ from the relation between a youth worker and their youths.

The school system and the ways of teaching differs a great deal in different countries in Europe. This article is written from a Swedish perspective. To use this in other areas you would probably have to adjust some parts of it to fit in to your situation. It is directed to teachers and school management that need to handle the impact of migration and work out ways to integrate and motivate migrating students.

THE SWEDISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

In Sweden, school is mandatory from the last year in pre-school to the 9th grade in compulsory school. After compulsory school one can study at upper secondary school, followed by

the University or University collage, but those are optional types of schools. Young refugees have the right to attend school if they start school before they turn 18. As long as they are asylum seekers school is optional, but if they get their residence permit school is mandatory for them as well.

There is no established policy how to welcome those asylum seekers who want to attend school in Sweden, so the school start for these people could vary a great deal depending on the size of the town, the number of asylum seekers etcetera. In some places the students are placed in a special class where they look into former education and the level of knowledge in different subjects, also the education in Swedish is started. Within 3 months the students are supposed to be placed in a suitable school in the local area. In other places the asylum seekers are placed directly into a class in some school in the local area. However school starts, these new students have the right to get help with their studies in their first language as long as necessary.

It is hard to tell which way to start school is better than the other. As we see it there are benefits in both. If the student is younger the best way probably is to put them in a regular class at once, especially if there are many students speaking the target language as their first language. In the higher grades the amount of texts increases, there are many subject headings and nominalisations, all to all the language is more advanced, which means that the students would benefit from having some preparation in a special class.

THE EDUCATION

All compulsory schools and upper secondary schools must follow the Education Act and the regulations from Skolverket¹. There should be equality in the education, regardless where you live. But at the same time, as a teacher you have much freedom how to teach your stu-

¹ The Education Administration

dents. You can plan your education so that it suits you and the group you are teaching for the moment, as long as your teaching corresponds to the knowledge requirements and the core content in the curriculum from Skolverket.

In the Swedish school it is very important to let the students be a part in the elaboration of the education. Therefore, classical teacher-centred teaching is not so common. There is an endeavour that the students should be participating in conversations, question and critically review information. This kind of teaching requires more of dialogues with the students rather than giving instructions which are followed by different exercises.

One of the Swedish schools' overall commitments, is to create a secure environment where students dare to share their opinions, even if their opinions would be in conflict with fundamental democratic values. As employees in school we are not allowed to try to persuade someone to change their opinion or point of view, no matter the opinion. But what we can and should do, is to question and challenge these opinions in an orderly fashion. We should also try to put these opinions in greater contexts, and in that way try to make themselves reconsider their way of thinking. This is an important part of the school's remit.

According to Swedish law, the school's set of regulations and the curriculum, freedom of speech is really important and highly regarded. Therefore, the school cannot limit a student's freedom of speech. At the same time, it is forbidden to discriminate someone, in any way. Therefore, Skolverket has come to a conclusion, in their report "Skolans roll i arbetet mot våldsbejakande extremism"², that there is a need to clarify the relation between freedom of speech, regulations and rules regarding reprimands towards discrimination and other kinds of victimisation. It must be clear what a school should and may do to make a single student respect and consent the fundamental values of the society. Skolverket has suggest-

² How the school should work against violent extremism [freely translated]

ed the government to start an investigation to analyse the regulations when it comes to democratic commitment in relation to students' rights.

WHAT COULD OPEN ON TO RADICALISATION?

Research has shown that there are some factors that, in some occasions, could result in radicalisation and also violent radicalisation. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that most youths with these experiences will not be radicalised. Some of these factors are:

- Alienation, an absence of the feeling to be a part in the society, to belong. A feeling of being excluded and to lack future possibilities
- Searching for an identity - an insecurity in your identity and who you want to be
- A normalisation of violence, to grow up in an area where violence is common
- Lack of knowledge and source criticism, especially when it comes to religion and beliefs, could make one receptive to propaganda from extremist groups
- Low credence to the society, through experiences or preconceptions think that one cannot get any help from civic functions like police and social security, to think that it is better to try to solve one's own problems

More information on the impact of identity and the sense of belonging for the risk of radicalisation can be found in our [IO1 Research Contribution, The Use of Transformative Learning](#).³

THE SCHOOL'S PART IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The school is an important part to keep people away from violent extremism. Yet, schools have no possibilities to work with all the factors that could lead to violent extremism, nevertheless schools have the possibility to work with many of these factors and hopefully suc-

³ If Link does not work, open the document here: <https://bit.ly/327V41o>

ceed to influence. Sadly though, one must admit that schools do not use their full potential according to this matter.

In spite of school's explicit democratic remit, there are few children who address the role of schools. When we asked what function schools could fulfil in effort to counter violent Islamist extremism, it emerges that children appear to perceive school's remit as being primarily to convey measurable knowledge rather than democratic values (Children and Young People's Experiences of Violent Islamist Extremism pp. 51-52).

Skolverket works with a report, on the behalf of the Swedish government, how schools should work to counter extremism. It is a complex matter because there are several laws and regulations to consider. Schools have an important democratic remit. It is written in the curriculum that "Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures" (<https://www.skolverket.se/getFile?file=3984>).

Students have the right to have their opinions, but at the same time they are not allowed to insult others, or to make the school environment insecure for anyone.

It is not the school's remit to report students to the police or other instances working to counter violent extremism, for their point of views or for different signs that could be signs of violent extremism. If employees at school have some worries concerning students, this should be reported to social services. Schools have no expressed remit to prevent crime. Responsible authority has the responsibility to provide a safe and secure school environment. "The school should strive for an open atmosphere, where different views can meet, be tested and challenged" [free translation] (Skolans roll i arbetet mot våldsbejakande extremism p. 16). If schools started to report children's and students' opinions or possible signs for radicalisation to the police or local co-ordinators working to counter violent extremism, there is a great risk that the trust between the employees at school and the students decrease and schools remit aggravate.

THE ORGANISATION'S PART IN CREATING A SECURE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

First and foremost, there must be rules that everyone working at the school knows about. There also must be routines how to let new co-workers know about these rules.

There must be rules:

- How to handle the personal data, according to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)
- To survey the students' knowledge and how to validate their former grades, if there are some
- When students are transferred from one school to another, from one part of the country to another
- How to follow up students' well-being and progress
- How to work with integration. That the school contributes with structures and activities so that the students, more or less, are forced to integrate. Which of course must work both ways, between the inhabitants and the immigrants

One quite common question from our students is how they could get Swedish friends, which demonstrates the need of a more regulated work with integration.

Related to this, some students in this project told us that being part of this project and have been given the opportunity to travel and meet youths from other parts of Europe made them feel important and as a part of the rest of the school, since our school is involved in many EU-projects, but this is the first targeting the foreign-born students.

The students must get information about different professions at school, and from whom they could get help in different matters. Also the organisation must have a clear framework so that teachers do not have to act as social welfare secretaries. There must be clear what is expected and in our commitment. To obtain this there must be a direction that is able to guide, even if we in our profession take a wrong path.

The students think that it is hard to understand and grasp the Swedish school system, especially those with experience of school from their home countries. That means that the study and career advisers must inform the students and their legal guardians about the Swedish school system, from pre-school to university.

Teachers must get further training. As a teacher you must be educated so that you in a better way know how to think and act when working with refugees, to be as prepared as possible when they arrive. For instance, if you are not aware of different procedures how to greet one and other, it could be a problem. Maybe you as a teacher would be insulted if a parent of the other gender doesn't take your hand when you reach out yours. In school it is also good to know some about the school system in the countries where your students come from to avoid misunderstandings.

The classes should be mixed in a well-thought-out way, with a mix of students, partly a mix of Swedish and foreign students, partly a mix of students with different nationalities. At the same time the students themselves point out that it is important to have people from their own nationality in their class, which give them the opportunity to discuss different matters in their first language. And the first language is, according to research, crucial for their cognitive development (Cummins 1996). It is also important to have a study guidance, preferably in your first language.

THE TEACHER'S PART IN CREATING A SECURE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

There are many different aspects to this matter. Is it important what kind of person you are, how you as a teacher act, your personality etc.? Is it important how you treat the students, how you succeed to include them and gaining their trust? Is it important how lessons are managed? Of course, all of these aspects matter.

As a teacher:

- You must be secure and comfortable in your role. When you are comfortable and secure your focus is not on yourself, but on your students and your teaching
- You must be empathic and able to see and deal with students that are struggling with more than just the learning process, but in the same time have the confidence in other professions, at school, and guide the students to the right profession for their problem, e.g. psychologist
- You must be able to distinguish between private and personal. It could be fine if you share personal experiences with the students, for instance as an example, but you are not their friend, so you cannot share personal experiences to get comfort from your students
- You must be prepared to question and sometimes reevaluate your own valuations, and your ways to look at the world, the society etc. Also, you must be able to see that there is more than one way, your way, that could be the right way
- If you get to know something in confidence, cherish the confidence, but at the same time, some things e.g. illegal or dangerous things you must tell others about. If there are things you must tell others, tell the student in advance that you will tell
- Remember that details are important. It's important for the students to be seen, heard and known. Learn their names, FAST. Ask about the small, not so important things e.g. how the visit at the dentists worked out. Try to see a new hair cut
- Show an interest in the students' heritage. Encourage them to tell about their experiences from their home countries. Important though: start with the good ones. The nasty and bad things will come eventually when you have gained their trust. It is important that the students can be proud of their heritage and to let them feel and see that the knowledge they already have is also important and of use
- Always remember to let the students have a safe harbor. Do not force them in to a corner – let them choose what to tell and not. They must be certain that you will not force them to tell about their dark memories. But we must be prepared to support them if they tell personal stories that affect them.

At the same time, we must be aware that they are also normal youths with normal teen-age problems. They are not just formed through their asylum process.

TO CREATE A SECURE AND SAFE CLASSROOM

Despite their background the students must have the opportunity to have a normal life in school. In the classroom focus must be school, subjects and school work.

- There must be a distinct framework e.g. how the lessons are started and ended.
- You must have a distinct frame for what will be done during the lesson or learning period. And when it comes to the possibility to tell their own stories they must be able to do it on their own initiative and in their own way and as much as they want for the moment. Very important is that there always must be a way out, when they don't want to tell anymore.
- Lessons must be lessons and not therapy, there are examples when teachers have had some kind of therapy with some student so that the ones who wants to study doesn't get the help they are entitled too
- There must be consistency in the learning environment, that is, the students must be certain what is expected and must be able to predict how you will react in different situations, some kind of stability
- You must teach how to listen and give feedback, what is allowed to do and not allowed, during a discussion or presentation. You, as a leader, can with your way of acting, show how this is done i.e. asking interesting and supporting questions, even to presentations that are not so good. They must know that it is under no circumstances allowed to laugh at someone or diminish someone or something said or done in the classroom.
- You should discuss strategies with the students, both learning strategies and strategies how to cope and act if they are not feeling well psychologically but want to be in school anyway.

SOME EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCE OF SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION FOR IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

We have experienced that it is good to work with different text types, preferably text types where there are no need of truthfulness and that kind of correctitude. In these kinds of assignments, the students get feedback on the linguistic matters, regardless if the content is facts or fiction. That gives the students a possibility to write about their own experiences, or parts of their own experiences.

Fictional text writing gives the students a possibility to describe important places, persons, and to write about episodes in their past that they want to put in writing. When they share self-experienced matters, they must be able to choose what to tell and not. There could never be any claim to tell the whole truth. Their stories could be a mixture of self-experience, things they have heard others tell and pure fiction.

Poems is another kind of suitable text for writing without a need of truthfulness and correctitude. There are many different ways to work with poems. But all kind of poems are suitable for writing about feelings. This could be done in just a few words, so even if you have not gained much of your new language you could manage to write a poem.

It is also important, especially if they have just started to learn their new language, that they have the possibility to use their first language, since their thoughts are more advanced in that language. Besides it is important to acknowledge their first language as a crucial part of their progress in their new language. It is also important to let them know that their knowledge and experiences from their former life is significant and that they are given possibilities to show and use this in their school work.

In the education of Religion, they could use the knowledge about the religion they grew up with. They could compare their home country's religion and the religion in their new country. The same goes for their first language, in the Swedish classes. Also, in the education of Social science they could use their knowledge about their home country's regime and economy and compare with their new country.

CONCLUSION

From our point of view, we have learnt so much during the time in this project. We have learnt a lot about the tendencies in radicalisation, signs and what to be aware of, because we have read a lot of research, and studies about the subject and also attended different lectures, to be able to write the article. Moreover we have learnt many things from and about our students since we, besides the regular things, have been focusing other things in their assignments, which we furthermore can use in our teaching henceforth.

The highlight in this project though was the Learning Activity in Berlin, in which some of our students attended. All of us learnt a lot in the meeting with the other project participants. It gave us memories for life. After this week the students realised the benefits of knowing English, and they were more motivated in their studies in the subject. Their ability to speak English had also improved during the week.

The school has an important commitment when it comes to working with fundamental democratic values, something that has been even more clear to us, when working in this project. In some reports though, students point out that the school tend to focus mostly on measurable knowledge instead of democratic values. It is important that all parts in the society work together in this matter and we really look forward to read the upcoming report from Skolverket and hope that the report will clarify the school's part in preventing radicalisation.

You can find further examples for your practical work here:

Salto Compass – Choose Methods for School

<https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/compass-manual-on-human-rights-education-with-young-people.344/>

SOURCES

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