



# Preventing Violent Extremism

## Former Right-Wing Extremists in School-Based Prevention Work

Recommendations for Educators

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**NZK**

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## Background and Intentions

School run primary prevention<sup>1</sup> measures that are based on the (partial) biography of former extremists have existed for a long time and are widely used, both in Germany and internationally. Four intended objectives, in particular, can be stated with regard to pupils as the target group:

- Prevention of radicalization and extremism;
- Clarification of the dangers of politically extreme scenes;
- Knowledge transfer;
- Explanation of the process of entering and exiting the scene using a specific biographical example.

Here, the main assumption is that the credibility of biographical narratives of former extremists – which are underpinned by real life experiences – are more effective with pupils than pure knowledge transfer (Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20). However, nationally and internationally, there is very little empirical knowledge about the effects of such preventive initiatives (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020; Bellasio et al., 2018; Holdaway & Simpson, 2018; Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2016). Hence, the authors have – in the context of the empirical study "Evaluation of a School-Based Prevention Measure from a Former Right-Wing Extremist"<sup>2</sup> – for the first time conducted a process and impact study of such a programme. The goal of this exploratory study was primarily to obtain results with respect to possible effects on the target group of pupils, while also shedding light on the pupils' reception of these measures.<sup>3</sup> The following recommendations for dealing with biography-based prevention measures of former right-wing extremists are based mainly on the results of this evaluation study and on the application practice in Germany. They are specifically designed to assist stakeholders in educational work.

<sup>1</sup> "Primary prevention focuses on protecting people from developing a given problem. (...) Secondary prevention focuses on halting progress of a given problem (...). Tertiary prevention encompasses the remediation of a problem among those who concretely manifest a given problem." (Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2016, p. 10 et seq.)

<sup>2</sup> For example: Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20; <https://www.nzkrim.de> (07/10/2019).

<sup>3</sup> Given the general research gap, the author's research interest went beyond the evaluation of the exemplary prevention measure. In order to generate further insights on this topic, we also carried out a survey across Germany of the authorities responsible for crime and extremism prevention in the federal states, interviews with members of organisations who deploy former extremists in their preventive work, and performed a media analysis in order to generate more specific information related to the application practice in Germany (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020).

Firstly, we provide a general overview of issues that you may wish to consider in a decision for or against applying such an initiative. This is followed by specific recommendations that are important if you have decided to proceed with a measure. These focus on the framework conditions of the prevention session, the content and methodical design, as well as former-specific aspects. The explanations do not mean that biography-based measures will necessarily have preventive effects if the recommendations are followed; to determine this, the sessions would have to be evaluated accordingly (cf. Beelmann, 2012). Instead, the content is to be understood as a guideline for meaningful and target group orientated application.

In general, it seems advisable to apply this form of school-based prevention work with care. Thus, it should be considered carefully, if and, where necessary, with whom and in what way it is to be carried out at the school. So that other pedagogical professionals can benefit from your experience with external providers, it is worthwhile to share your experiences not only within your own school, but also beyond.

The school system provides a central place of learning for children and adolescents and performs a meaningful role in the formation of values and for sustained violence and extremism prevention (cf. Council of Europe, 2018; Farrington, Ttofi, & Lösel, 2016; Merrell, Levitt, & Gueldner, 2009). It is essential that prevention topics are dealt with not only once per year. For actual and sustainable prevention, they should be a regular and continuous part of the curriculum and everyday school life, ideally embedded in a proven prevention concept.<sup>4</sup>

The following sections relate to school-based prevention sessions by former right-wing extremists. They apply to both prevention measures that can be offered by formers alone, as well as, for example, in the company of an exit worker. The underlying directions may also be applied to biography-based prevention programmes for pupils in general (such as those offered by former members of other extremist scenes, drug addicts or offenders).

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<sup>4</sup> As studies in comparable projects have shown, corresponding measures that are anchored in the curriculum can have positive effects on pupils (cf. Garaigordobil, 2012; Emerson, Orr, & Connolly, 2014). The international state of research on primary prevention, i.e. aimed at all pupils in a class, shows that the use of long-term measures is preferable to short-term interventions (Farrington, Ttofi, & Lösel, 2016).



## Principles and Recommendations for Action

## 2.1 Preliminary considerations for decision-making

If you are considering using the prevention session of a former at your school, it may be helpful to consider the following points in advance:

### Objective:

[What would you like to achieve by using this programme?](#)

Biography-based prevention sessions only provide the pupils with an exemplary biography and thus a subjective view of the topic of right-wing extremism. In this respect, it is not generalizable (factual) information. Rather, this approach may be used as an instrument to help connect to pupils who, in their stage of life, may be hard for adults to reach and help to stimulate engagement with the topic. An in-depth examination, however, requires regularity and variety to be integrated into everyday school life. Working with a single biography does not do justice to the complex topic of right-wing extremism and the efforts required to prevent it in a sustainable way. Biography-based prevention measures do not appear to be suitable for the pure transfer of general knowledge. They can only support a knowledge gain; but this should not be the focus.

### Information basis:

[What is the organisational connection, the qualification of the former and the \(pedagogical\) design of the proposed prevention programme?](#)  
[Does the provider ensure appropriate quality standards?](#)  
[Does the programme appear legitimate and reputable to you?](#)

Try to obtain a comprehensive overview of this, if possible. This is important because some factors may conflict with the preventive objective of the measure (cf. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), 2017).

### Financial aspects:

[How much funding could or should be allocated to the prevention initiative?](#)

Prevention sessions by formers are usually not cost-neutral. It is essential in this regard that the fees are proportionate; they should be structured in



the way of an expense allowance. If this is not the case, they call into question the integrity and the underlying motivation. Restraint is also required because status as a former extremist should not provide the basis for making a living.

### Portrayal in the media:

[Should there be any media reporting about the prevention measure at the school?](#)

Some providers of these sessions have a media presence. They may market autobiographical books, run a video channel in social media or be seen regularly in the daily press. They also use these outlets to present their school-based prevention work and are on occasions accompanied by journalists to school appointments. Just like with the fees, some restraint appears to be necessary here. School-based prevention work should not be carried out for the purpose of self-promotion and gain. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that the pupils will not be distracted from the content of the prevention session if the media is present.

## 2.2 Recommendations for application

If you have chosen to run a biography-based prevention initiative at your school, we recommend noting the following aspects:

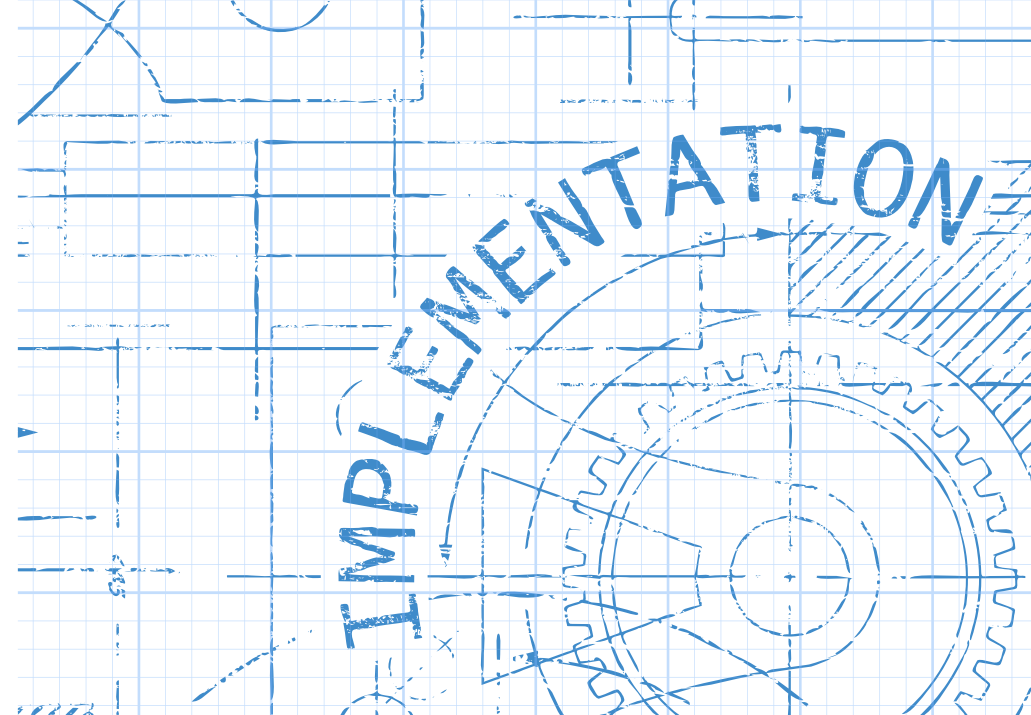
### 2.2.1 Framework conditions

#### **Voluntary participation and consent of parent/legal guardian:**

In the interests of the children and adolescents, the preventive session should not be carried out as a compulsory school event. Instead, it is recommended that participation be voluntary and that the consent of the parent/legal guardian be sought. This seems to be necessary in order to allow non-participation in the measure, considering possible re-traumatization of victims of right-wing violence or other facets that could be of significance during the prevention initiative, as well as possible traumatization aspects of potential victims of right-wing violence (e.g. migrant pupils, pupils with disabilities or pupils who openly oppose right-wing extremism).

#### **Grade level:**

In some instances, formers offer prevention sessions even for very young pupils. From our point of view, application would only be acceptable from the upper secondary level or from the age of 14. This is on the one hand because the pupils should already have the historical knowledge of fascism and on the other hand because political understanding develops primarily from adolescence. Both factors are necessary for the contextualization of the content of such preventive measures. They may also contain narratives of self-perpetrated or witnessed acts of violence. These aspects should also be considered in your decision on the class level. In general, it should be taken into account that each class is different in its makeup and the development phases of adolescents vary greatly. Hence, it is advised that the decision for holding the session for a certain class (level) should always be made for a specific case, with particular consideration of the different learning levels and aspects of inclusion.



#### **Group size:**

Some measures by and with former extremists are carried out purely as lectures to multiple classes or class levels, for example, in the school hall. However, such a lecture does not constitute a preventative session. A group size that exceeds that of a class does not appear to be effective or advisable for the prevention session as such, nor for the active participation of the pupils.

#### **Necessary educational preparation and follow-up:**

It should be mandatory that the prevention measure be prepared and followed up by pedagogical professionals of the school. It is recommended to take into account not only aspects related to the content but also those that concern the former. It should also be made clear that the exemplary individual biography is an isolated case that cannot be generalized. In the ideal case, the preparation and follow-up should also address other biographies as well as the victims' perspective.



#### Preparation:

- Understanding and preparing for the prevention measure and the former (e.g. what is planned as part of the session? Who is the former extremist exactly?)
- Contextualization of topics (e.g. fascism and current manifestations of right-wing extremism, symbols, codes)
- Joint preparation of possible questions for the former with the pupils

#### Follow-up:

- Some formers offer their own follow-ups on the sessions. But repeated involvement of the former extremist is less a suitable pedagogical follow-up than it is a repeated application of an externally run session. Hence, this is not a replacement for a mandatory follow-up by the school staff and usually results in extra costs.
- Discussion of the content (e.g. what did you learn?)
- Gathering the mood and perception of the pupils (e.g. what did you like/dislike? Did you feel uncomfortable during the prevention session?)

#### Presence of teaching staff:

The presence of teachers during the prevention session should be compulsory, not only so that an adequate follow-up can be carried out.

#### Role of teachers:

The capacity of teachers to act as role models to their pupils also exists in the carrying out of the prevention measure. Although the former extremist structures the lesson for the prevention session and thus serves as a role model, the participating teachers are jointly responsible for compliance with conventional school and behaviour rules.

#### Breaks:

Although the prevention measure is not a regular class, it is advisable to take breaks at appropriate times. This is not only important in order to maintain the attention of pupils, but also gives pupils, where necessary, the opportunity to discreetly inform teachers that they do not wish to continue participating in the prevention session for personal reasons (see also: Voluntary participation and consent of parent/legal guardian).

### 2.2.2 Content

#### Focus of the prevention session:

The focus of the formers' narratives should include parts of their biography and the process of turning towards extremism, life in the scene as well as disengagement and deradicalization. In particular, the sequential nature of these developments should be emphasised. Likewise, it is important to point out possible steps that might be taken so that pupils do not turn to a right-wing group. The perspective of victims should also be included. By no means should detailed narratives of criminal behaviour, violent events and the like be included. Even if the affinity that right-wing extremists have with violence and the criminal milieu is relevant, this should be explained within clearly defined limits. Ideally, this should be discussed in advance with the former.

### 2.2.3 Methodical design

#### Pupil involvement:

Methodically, the prevention measure should, first of all, be designed in a lively way. The interaction between the pupils and the former extremist is fundamental here: Questions from the pupils and answers from the former – and vice versa – provide a good opportunity for an interactive presentation.



Likewise, the joint development of content and the use of role plays are beneficial. Under no circumstances should the preventive session consist solely of a monologue by the former.

#### **Media use:**

Furthermore, visualisation and an illustrative presentation enhance the format of the prevention measure and thus are to be welcomed. However, it is also important here to pay attention to the content of the media used. Ideally, these should be seen in advance and agreed with the provider to determine which materials are to be presented to pupils and which are not. This appears to be essential, in particular, because in practice in Germany, individual formers have also shown images of propaganda material and played right-wing music. This approach may trigger impulses of fascination in pupils rather than serve as a means of preventing attraction to extremist scenes.

### **2.2.4 Former-specific aspects**

#### **Personal meeting:**

Before carrying out such a prevention session at your school it is advisable that you gain a personal impression of the former and, where applicable, his/her entourage. The content and objectives as well as the design of the measure in terms of age and target group can thus be addressed in a personal conversation.

#### **Credibility of disengagement and deradicalization:**

The former's actual successfully completed disengagement and deradicalization is of utmost importance. This should reveal itself by not only a change in behaviour (disengagement), but also a change in attitude (deradicalization). If you have doubts about this or your assessment is uncertain, it makes sense to refrain from the proposed prevention session.

#### **Demeanour and use of language:**

The results of the evaluation study clearly show that, in addition to aspects of authenticity, a youthful demeanour and use of language by the former extremist are appealing to many pupils (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020; Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20). Thus, such characteristics may facilitate access to pupils on the topic of right-wing extremism. However, certain ways of expres-



sion can also have negative consequences. It is advised that you agree with the former in advance on a sensible use of language (e.g. avoiding expletives or derogatory connotations).

#### **Possible fascination:**

The ability of a former extremist to impress pupils can also have negative consequences. Although the results of the pupil surveys in the evaluation study did not reveal that the sessions created or promoted any fascination with the right-wing scene and/or a criminal lifestyle, occasional feedback from participating teachers as well as experience from Sweden<sup>5</sup> show that the sessions could generate fascination in some members of the audience (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020; Gansewig & Walsh, 2019, p. 13; Walsh & Gansewig, 2019, p. 24 et seq.; Lodenius, 2010). In the planning and application, it is advised not to disregard this possibility.

<sup>5</sup> On the Swedish experience, Lodenius remarked: "For many years Exit was recognisable to mainly pupils in schools because of numerous lectures about what it is like to be a former Nazi, and the road to transformation. But by this time Exit started to question this work for many reasons. It can serve as a small flame that dies out after we leave the school. It might not change anything, says a staff member of the disengagement programme (A/N.)). It has been suggested that lectures in schools with former criminals, Nazis and drug addicts sometimes work the other way around and that some listeners get to be more fascinated than discouraged, in spite of good intentions to show the negative sides." (Lodenius, 2010, p. 13)

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