

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT RADICALISATION AND POLARISATION

Insights from the Flemish case

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Summary

- Education plays an important role in the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation.
- In the first phase of the action plan a certain tension and a “security reflex” were apparent in the approach of education professionals. In the following years, the approach gradually broadened to the broader task of creating inclusive and resilient schools, largely avoiding the risks associated in the PVE-E literature with instrumentalisation and securitisation of education in the fight against radicalisation.
- The plan succeeded in strengthening cooperation and enhancing expertise at the level of the administration and the networks. Important challenges were linked to the overburdening of pedagogical and welfare service providers and the sustainable safeguarding and evaluation of the results of project-based interventions acquired through the many training programmes.
- Overall, the gradual broadening of the Flemish approach to violent extremism was positively evaluated which might be explained by the fact that the 2017 Flemish action plan was developed and implemented in close cooperation with the main institutional players in the Flemish education system, resulting in deep involvement, participation and cooperation and opening the possibility to engage education professionals on their own merits, based on the intrinsic value of their work.
- This observation raises the dilemma of whether such a broad pedagogical approach should still be part of a separate PVE-E policy or whether it should be an integral part of regular education policy.

Introduction

In 2012, various schools in Belgian cities, such as Antwerp and Vilvoorde, were confronted with alarming signals that a number of pupils were radicalising into violent strands of Islamism. Over the following years, a high number of Belgian youth left their home towns to fight with extremist and terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq.^a In 2015 and 2016 respectively, Paris and Brussels were hit by terrorist attacks. To tackle the problem of violent radicalisation, Belgian authorities at the local, regional and federal levels began to develop policy responses. While in the Belgian state structure the federal government is responsible for law enforcement (i.e. via the security and intelligence services and the justice system), the regions (in particular the Flemish and francophone Communities) have the power to establish preventive policy in sectors such as education, welfare and youth work. In 2015, the Flemish government developed and implemented a comprehensive action plan to prevent violent radicalisation. This plan was updated in 2017.^b Reflecting a broader trend in the prevention of violent extremism,¹ the Flemish action plan assigns an important role to interventions in the education system. Actions, for example, focus on enhancing cooperation within the education sector, strengthening knowledge and expertise through training and manuals, and financing projects to assist schools struggling with radicalisation and to promote democratic citizenship.

As scholars and education professionals have noted time and again, leveraging education in preventive policies to tackle violent extremism (PVE-E) is valuable and promising, although there are a number of challenges and possible pitfalls. Broadly speaking, policy-makers are confronted with two challenges. A first is to develop actions and interventions that are adequate. They must be adequate not only in the sense that they are in line with

insights and recommendations in the pedagogical and PVE-E literature but also in the sense that they respond to needs as they are experienced by stakeholders and practitioners in the field. The path of establishing adequate policy is strewn with a number of pitfalls. Concerns have in particular been highlighted with regard to involving teachers in “first-line” detection of violent radicalisation and, more broadly, the risk of securitising pedagogical relations.² A second challenge concerns the question of how preventive actions can be implemented in ways that are *effective* and *sustainable*. Preventive action plans typically work with a combination of two modes of operation: (1) entrusting regular administrations and service providers with additional tasks linked to the prevention of violent radicalisation and (2) financing project-based work by grassroots and civil society organisations. Both methods have benefits, but also potential drawbacks. While the former mode of operation can result in the overburdening of regular administrations and services, the latter runs the risk of investing scarce resources in short-term and ad hoc projects without enhancing capabilities in a more permanent way.

This paper takes a closer look at how Flemish policy-makers and key stakeholders in the Flemish education system have engaged with these challenges. The analysis is based on an analysis of relevant policy documents as well as on interviews with key persons in the administration and the education networks (see the box below for an introduction to the Flemish education system). Thus, this paper is able to present an inside view of how the education dimensions of the Flemish action plan have been developed and implemented in practice. One of the findings of the analysis is that, over the years, the Flemish response to the issue of radicalisation in education contexts has increasingly been conceived in terms of a broad pedagogical approach, emphasising the intrinsic value of good education instead of focusing one-

a In total, more than 400 people would depart from Belgium, the highest number per capita in Europe. See Renard, T. & Coolsaet, R. (2018), *From the kingdom to the caliphate and back: returnees in Belgium*, in: Renard, T. & Coolsaet, R. (eds.), *Returnees: who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them?* Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, pp. 19–40.

b There was a further update in May 2021, but this paper focuses on the 2015 and 2017 versions.

sidedly on a security-driven approach. As a consequence, Flemish PVE-E policies not only tie in to a significant degree with key insights and recommendations in the literature but also respond to needs as they are expressed by stakeholders and practitioners in the field. However, an examination of how these actions and interventions have been implemented in practice indicates that the picture is mixed. Although the Flemish action plan has succeeded in achieving a number of its objectives, it is also possible to identify areas where an effective and sustainable implementation of preventive actions has proved to be more challenging. Specific challenges are linked, for example, to overburdened pedagogical and welfare service providers and the sustainable safeguarding of the results of project-based initiatives.

Local context is of crucial importance in preventive programmes and actions. What works in one region may not have the same effects in another. Nonetheless, the PVE-E literature has emphasised time and again the importance of learning from practices across national contexts. Although an increasing number of PVE-E programmes and interventions have been developed in recent years, (comparative) evaluations of (the effectiveness of) these programmes have remained scarce.³ An important step towards strengthening the international knowledge base on PVE-E programmes is sharing findings and insights from case studies. In that respect, it is hoped that this paper will be of interest to scholars, policy-makers and education stakeholders working in the PVE-E field in other European contexts.

A very short introduction to the Flemish education system

In the Belgian federal state structure, the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking communities are responsible for education. In the Flemish education system, schools and school boards are organised into education networks, which have wide-ranging autonomy. Although the government sets minimal conditions for curricular attainment and for the regulation of schools, school boards and networks independently decide on matters such as pedagogical philosophy, teaching methods, curricula, timetables and staff appointments. In Flanders, there are three education networks. GO! Education is the official (and neutral) education network of the Flemish authorities. Government-aided public education comprises schools run by the municipal or provincial authorities, while government-aided private education (“free” education) is organised by private persons or organisations. “Government-aided” means, for example, that the state pays teachers’ salaries and provides additional funds for infrastructure. In Flanders, the “free” network consists mainly of Catholic schools, which constitute the majority of schools. Because of their autonomy, the education networks are key players in the Flemish education system. This is reflected in a long-standing tradition of involving these networks in policy-making processes on a wide variety of education-related issues. Consultation and cooperation mechanisms between the government and the networks are deeply embedded in the organisational structure of the Flemish education system.

Working alongside schools and school boards are pupil guidance centres (PGCs). Pupils, parents, teachers and school boards may approach a PGC regarding a variety of matters, including pedagogical assistance, information or advice about issues such as learning and studying, preventive health care and socio-emotional development. In Flanders there are 72 PGCs, each linked to one of the three education networks.⁴

Preventing violent extremism through education?

Before looking in detail at how the education-related actions in the Flemish action plan have been developed and implemented in practice, it is useful to briefly turn to the pedagogical literature on the prevention of violent radicalisation. This enables a better assessment of the extent to which the actions in the Flemish action plan tie in with key insights and recommendations in the literature.

Over recent years, PVE-E has begun to take shape as a distinct research domain.⁵ Because the need to involve education in the fight against violent radicalisation is less obvious than it may appear at first sight, a fundamental question raised in this literature relates to the role education can play in the prevention of violent extremism. In brief, prevention comprises “deliberate and systematic initiatives that anticipate risk factors”.⁶ In this sense, education cannot simply be equated with prevention, as it starts from an intrinsic, positively formulated pedagogical task. As such, it is not organised to prevent or tackle specific risks and problems.⁷ This does not mean, however, that education cannot have preventive value in addressing certain problems. For example, through inclusive education, fewer young people might become alienated or attracted to extremist ideologies. Furthermore, as Van Crombrugge et al. argue, specific preventive actions set up in schools with regard to problems or risks (such as violent extremism) could jeopardise the fulfilment of the intrinsic and positive mission of education.⁸

This discussion about the meaning of prevention in education settings is not merely academic. In times of social anxiety – such as periods with a threat of terrorist violence – there is a risk that policy efforts will not take the specific role that education can play in preventive efforts sufficiently into account. In some cases there is even a risk of instrumentalisation or “securitisation” of education.⁹ In these cases, the emphasis is one-sidedly placed on the detection of ‘at-risk’ youth in schools, often those with a Muslim background, and on cooperation with security agencies.¹⁰ This one-sided focus, however, could be detrimental to the necessary pedagogical relationship of trust with pupils.¹¹

What forms, then, can the prevention of violent extremism take in educational contexts, both in a general and in a more specific sense? Based on a review of the PVE-E literature, Stephens et al. distinguish a number of possible orientations.¹² A first approach emphasises enhancing the resilience of young people. “Resilience” here refers to strong, critical and flexible individuals who are armed against the temptations of the black-and-white discourse of extremist ideologies and groups. Over recent years, numerous initiatives have been set up in education under the banner of resilience enhancement. Their focuses have included sharpening pupils’ critical-thinking skills and media literacy, increasing their self-esteem and empathy, and improving their citizenship and human rights education. A second perspective focuses on identity and the period of existential enquiry that is common to adolescents, not least those with a migrant background. This stems from the idea that a perceived threat or marginalisation of one’s identity can entail openness to extremism. Education can play a role here by creating spaces for philosophical and identity-related questions, as well as by strengthening and validating the multi-layered identities of pupils. A third approach involves the school as a safe space for expressing and discussing radical views. The idea here is to give young people a voice and allow them to express their grievances, frustrations and growing political awareness in a safe and constructive way.

Stephens et al. warn against an overly individualistic approach to resilience and identity-based work.¹³ In their view, such an approach risks neglecting structural challenges linked to perceived injustices, discrimination, polarisation and unease.¹⁴ They therefore advocate additionally approaching resilience from a contextual and socio-ecological perspective. In pedagogical terms, this means, for example, working to develop an open and inclusive school climate. A contextual approach to resilience also relates to what happens outside schools. A “whole-school approach” emphasises the links with parents, external education experts and civil society.¹⁵ The police can also

be a partner to schools in certain cases – for example, when there is a real risk to the safety of young persons, staff and/or society. Reporting cases to the police, however, is no easy decision for schools as there are risks involved, such as over-reaction, arbitrariness, prejudice and stigmatisation.¹⁶ Van San et al. link this cautious stance to a pedagogical approach to radicalisation: “In a democratic society, adolescents with strong ideals should be treated first and foremost as politically interested actors A security perspective should only come into play when this kind of communication fails.”¹⁷

The role of education in Flemish PVE-E policies

2015–2017: seeking a balance between a security and a pedagogical approach

In 2015, in response to the departure of hundreds of young people to Iraq and Syria since 2012 and the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016, the Flemish government published a comprehensive action plan “to prevent radicalisation processes that may lead to extremism and terrorism”. With this plan, the government wanted to “prevent individuals from radicalising and detect signs of violent radicalisation as early as possible”.¹⁸ The plan contained, among other content:

- numerous actions aimed at the prevention of violent extremism through education, such as the appointment of contact persons responsible for the prevention of violent radicalisation both within the Department of Education and Training and among the education networks;
- plans for various kinds of cooperation and coordination mechanisms within the education system and beyond;
- provisions to establish a Network of Islam Experts to assist schools that had questions concerning (religious) radicalisation;
- provisions to organise training and courses to strengthen the expertise and skills of education professionals with regard to preventing violent radicalisation.

Because of the context of urgency in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the Flemish PVE-E policies were developed in a rather impromptu manner. At this early stage, many education professionals wrestled with uncertainty about how to act when they were confronted with discourse or behaviour by pupils that they perceived as problematic. On the one hand, this uncertainty could result in a certain passivity and reluctance to (re)act, while on the other it could also easily turn into an urge to act. The latter then commonly resulted in schools calling in the police, often all too quickly. Nonetheless, in this context of urgency, a number of real bottlenecks in the relations between schools and police were identified. For instance, it turned out that many schools were unclear about whom they could contact within the police regarding problems concerning violent radicalisation. Building on guidelines from 2007, which were initially developed to improve cooperation between schools and the police to tackle youth crime and related phenomena such as truancy, clearer agreements were made about fixed contact points for schools within local police forces.¹⁹ According to the Department of Education and Training, this was an important step forward. Nonetheless, as the contact person within the administration made clear, the administration did not want to prompt education professionals to start acting as an extension of the police forces:

“It is important that schools have good cooperation with the police. But that does not mean that we want to promote them reporting things more quickly or working with an extra-large magnifying glass. No, it’s just important that [schools and the police] know what they can, may or must expect of each other – that schools know, for example, what will happen if they report a case to the police Our guiding principle is: cobbler, stick to your last. Education must remain education and security belongs to the police.”²⁰

This policy was continued into the following years. Apart from in situations of acute threat, the education networks and the PGCs follow the line that contacting the police or bringing a case to a ‘local

integrated security cell^a is only justified after a series of pedagogical steps have been taken and when there is real concern about the safety of a young person, other people, staff and/or society.²¹ The idea here is that involving the police has an impact on the pedagogical relationship of trust between schools, PGCs and pupils:²²

“Far-reaching cooperation between the police, the judiciary and social services is not to be taken for granted. These sectors work with different objectives. I think it is especially important that we can build a relationship of trust with young people. I think that young people who radicalise, from whatever conviction, feel disappointed in society for the most part; they don't feel understood and they don't have trust. And building that relationship of trust and working transparently play a crucial role here.”²³

In order to emphasise the importance of the relationship of trust with pupils and the supportive position of PGCs, over the course of 2017 the PGC networks developed a manual on the role of PGCs in the context of the local multi-agency meetings.²⁴ This document contains guidelines for PGC staff regarding the conditions under which they can cooperate in local integrated security cells.

2017: Broadening the scope

In light of the expertise gained since 2015 and the evolving context, in June 2017 the Flemish action plan was updated. Besides the prevention of violent extremism, the emphasis was now also on the prevention of polarisation.²⁵ The 2017 plan was developed along five policy lines: (1) coordination and cooperation, (2) supporting the local approach, (3) the organisation of a person-centred approach, (4) strengthening knowledge and expertise, and (5) mobilising civil society. Within each of these policy lines, the action plan listed a wide range of concrete actions. Like the previous version, the revised action plan of 2017 placed a strong

emphasis on actions in the sphere of education. A look at the number of measures in the plan in which education was an involved partner immediately makes this clear. Whereas in the 2015 plan half of the actions focused on education (20 out of a total of 40 actions), in the new plan almost two-thirds (38 out of a total of 62 actions) mentioned education as an involved actor. Moreover, out of these 38 actions, 18 were exclusively targeted at education.²⁶ Besides various existing actions that were continued (such as the Network of Islam Experts), a number of new actions were launched, such as projects on polarisation management and measures to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In developing the education dimensions of the new action plan, the Flemish government relied on consultations with the education networks. Pedagogical experts from the networks were closely involved in outlining concrete actions. According to the contact persons involved, the consultations between the administration and the networks were open and constructive, based on mutual respect and shared concerns. According to one contact person, this way of working was “reassuring” and “did not cause nervousness” in the field.²⁷

Thus, the policy-making process leading up to the revised action plan in 2017 was different from that leading up to the earlier version in 2015. The first version of the action plan was developed in a context of societal alarm. Given the urgency, there was limited time for consultation with or input from the education sector. In 2017, however, there was considerably more room for interaction and consultation with key stakeholders. Moreover, policy-makers could also rely on data that had been collected since 2015 as well as on the expertise that had been gained since the start of the action plan. One of the main innovations in the plan was that the prevention of polarisation was

a A local integrated security cell is a multi-agency meeting that takes place at the local level under the direction of the mayor, where local authorities, police and local preventive services discuss cases. Schools and PGCs can be invited to the table.

now explicitly included as a policy objective. This broadening of the focus was positively received by the contact persons in the education networks. The preamble to the 2015 action plan had explicitly stated that the government wanted to avoid falling into the trap of “culturalising” the problem of violent radicalisation.²⁸ Nonetheless, in the view of several contact persons, until 2017 the plan had focused too much on Islamic extremism. One respondent remarked that “if I were to criticise the Flemish action plan, I would say that it has only focused on Islam”.²⁹ The complementary focus on polarisation in 2017, however, made it possible to broaden the scope and also address other forms of radicalisation, such as right-wing extremism. The interviewed contact persons judged this as an important step forward:

“The societal problem is broader than a very small segment of a specific religion and a number of people who have committed terrorist attacks based on that motivation ... So we are glad that this broadening [to include polarisation] has happened, because this broader approach is more recognisable, I think, for education practitioners.”³⁰

Broadening the scope of the action plan thus provided education professionals with a more familiar approach. From a pedagogical perspective, according to the contact persons, polarisation is a more engaging and less threatening concept to work with in class and school practice.³¹

This broadening of the scope is reflected in both the general objectives of the action plan and its concrete actions. While the overarching objective of the Flemish PVE-E policy is “to detect young people and young adults who are at risk of radicalisation as quickly as possible and keep them on board in our society”,³² stakeholders in the education system in Flanders deliberately place an emphasis on the second part of this general objective: keeping young people on board. The contact persons furthermore asserted that they had always been opposed to engaging education professionals in the detection of security risks. In cases where there are serious security issues, schools of course

will contact the police. But, outside these scenarios, contact persons strongly emphasised the specific and intrinsically pedagogical role of teachers and schools:

“Our role is primarily to educate. In the sense that we work positively on identity development, education may have a preventive value. But our core mission is certainly not to detect.”³³

The administration shares this view. The government does not prompt education professionals to take on a detection role. One of the central messages the administration wants to convey is “cobbler, stick to your last”.³⁴ The emphasis therefore is mainly on creating open and safe school climates, and engaging with radicalisation and polarisation from a broad pedagogical perspective. Several of the actions in the Flemish action plan are therefore not specific to the prevention of violent radicalisation but relate to more general pedagogical objectives.

This broad pedagogical perspective also inspires the way in which the three major education networks approach radicalisation and polarisation. In their vision statements, for example, the networks first and foremost emphasise the importance of addressing the increasing ethnic-cultural and religious (super-)diversity in Flemish schools in an open and positive way.³⁵ Inclusion, connection, dialogue and participation are key concepts. Similarly to the guidelines and manuals put forward by the administration, the networks also stress the importance of increasing the resilience of pupils, for example through critical thinking, media literacy, dialogue skills and positive identity development. Working on resilience, moreover, is also linked to stimulating, open and safe learning environments. Overall, for the networks the preventive value of education lies not necessarily in actions to target specific risks or problems but more in efforts to enhance the school climate. In other words, creating open, diverse and inclusive school climates is put forward as a crucial means of diminishing the breeding ground for negative developments such as violent radicalisation.³⁶

The Flemish action plan: an adequate response?

With its emphases on the intrinsic value of education and on enhancing pupils' and schools' resilience, the broad pedagogical approach borne out by the Flemish action plan ties in with some key insights and recommendations in the PVE-E literature. The education-related actions in the plan moreover seem to be adequately attuned to the prevailing needs as they are expressed by stakeholders in the education system. A possible explanation for this response to the problem of violent radicalisation might be found in the fact that the

education networks were strongly involved in the policy-making process in the lead-up to the 2017 policy. As mentioned above, the education networks have traditionally been involved in the development of Flemish education policies. Given this institutional constellation, the education networks have participated in the conception, development and implementation of Flanders' actions related to PVE-E. This continuous dynamic of coordination and cooperation helps to explain not only the gradual broadening of the scope of the action plan but also its responsiveness to needs as they are expressed by stakeholders and education professionals in Flanders.

From policy to practice: challenges and obstacles

The Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation set many things in motion in the region's education system: consultation and cooperation among key stakeholders, practical guidelines and training for first-line professionals, and projects such as the Network of Islam Experts. The various involved parties realised some of the objectives of the action plan, such as enhancing cooperation between stakeholders and strengthening expertise at the level of the education networks.³⁷ Nonetheless, in other respects, the implementation of the action plan encountered a number of challenges and obstacles linked to questions of effectiveness and sustainability. This section focuses on two of these obstacles.

Investing in the long term?

PVE-E action plans typically work with a combination of two modes of operation: (1) entrusting regular administrations and service providers with additional tasks linked to the prevention of violent radicalisation and (2) financing project-based work by grassroots and civil society organisations. Both modes of operation have benefits as well as some drawbacks.³⁸

Involving regular services and structures can be an appropriate choice because it builds on existing expertise and networks. Moreover, expertise gained by taking on new tasks can more easily be sustained within regular administrations and services, especially because it complements

existing expertise. This way of working also offers the possibility of establishing links between regular operations and the tasks taken up as part of the action plan. This makes it possible to avoid one-sided problem-oriented approaches. On the other hand, this method of working can run into problems if regular structures are overburdened and no additional resources are made available to take up the additional tasks. Many of the education-related actions in the Flemish action plan had to be organised within and by regular structures. This was a conscious choice. The government wanted to avoid setting up too many new and separate structures.³⁹ For this reason, contact persons, working groups and consultation forums were established within existing structures in the administration, the networks and the PGC networks.

This choice to operate from within regular services and structures generally worked well. As will be clear from the discussion above, the action plan promoted intense cooperation and coordination between the contact persons in the administration and the education networks. This proved to be effective. At the level of the PGCs, however, this strategy came up against some obstacles. The PGCs in Flanders were already struggling with a number of structural demands, so the issue of violent radicalisation placed an additional burden on a system that was already under pressure. The limited capacity and long waiting lists in youth welfare centres, for example, mean that seamless referrals of pupils to these welfare centres are often not possible. Moreover, the PGCs themselves are understaffed and overburdened. The action plan did not generate additional resources for the PGCs. In that sense, engaging the PGCs in the prevention of violent radicalisation meant a net increase in their workload:⁴⁰

"The moment the Pupil Guidance Centre has to get involved in supporting a school in issues regarding radicalisation. ... well, that just means that there are other things that simply ... have to wait much longer ... Now there is just not enough room."⁴¹

Besides engaging regular services, the Flemish action plan also provided funding for project-based work. Over the years, four major projects were financed under the plan. The 2015 plan funded the Network of Islam Experts (discussed above) and Project Connect, which assists schools facing problems linked to radicalisation. In 2017, additional funds were released for short-term projects on polarisation and the empowerment of vulnerable youth. Working with projects, like engaging existing structures, has a number of benefits as well as potential drawbacks. On the one hand, project-based work is a suitable way to respond quickly and flexibly to phenomena in which the government itself does not have much expertise. Projects also offer space for experimentation: methodologies can be tested before they are implemented more broadly. If a certain method proves successful, support within an organisation can grow to embed it in regular policy. At the same time, there are a number of pitfalls associated with a project-based approach. For example, short-term and temporary projects risk being less sustainable. In practice, it is often not easy to secure results from short-term projects in a sustainable manner.

The Flemish case shows this dichotomy. On the one hand, the ambitions and methods of the projects that were financed under the Flemish action plan are highly appreciated in the field of education. An example is the Network of Islam Experts, which provides special expertise that is very useful for schools and teachers. Because of its success, the government has supported this project on a more permanent basis. On the other hand, other projects encountered a number of problems linked to the sustainability of their results. That the scope and design of these projects often remained rather limited was quite logical, given their short durations. More of an issue was that there were differences in the degrees to which these projects paid attention to evaluation and the dissemination and sustainable safeguarding of their results. Some projects put a lot of effort into this, while others, given their sometimes limited

capacities, could only pay limited attention. Additionally, and not surprisingly, the short-term nature of the financing posed a number of challenges for the sustainability of the projects. The fact that subsidies were prolonged only on a yearly basis, for example, caused difficulties with regard to the timing and organisation of tailor-made plans in schools.⁴² Additionally, all project representatives noted that a one-year period is a very short time to achieve objectives and bring about structural, widespread change. Although some projects explicitly aimed to create ownership by the schools where their interventions took place and project organisers often thought very consciously about how the results of their work could be sustained, reality often proved to be stubborn. Project organisers, for example, often duly realised that their project had primarily reached motivated and engaged teachers and schools.⁴³

The contact persons within the education networks were also aware of the problems related to the effectiveness of project-based work. Although they clearly appreciated the projects' objectives and methodologies, they expressed concerns about their sustainability. In some cases, the contact persons also raised the question of a possible overlap between what the projects aimed to do and the tasks of the education networks themselves. They argued that if this overlap is strong, their networks should at least be involved in the design and roll-out of the projects. They also suggested allocating (part of) the resources to the existing structures themselves. In the opinions of the contact persons, the pedagogical services of the networks are often better placed to achieve sustainable results with the schools in their network, because they can work in a more structured way to enhance the policy-making capacity of schools.⁴⁴ According to some of the project organisers, on the other hand, it often proves crucial to bring in the perspective of an external organisation.⁴⁵

A last question related to the issue of sustainability is whether and how knowledge and expertise on

preventing violent radicalisation and addressing polarisation were strengthened in the Flemish education system. Analysis indicates that expertise on the level of the contact persons and the education networks was effectively enhanced. Nonetheless, there is still a question relating to knowledge management. Key figures (such as the contact persons) have gained a lot of expertise and experience in recent years. As such, their roles and expertise could not easily be taken over if they were to change jobs or their functions were abolished. According to the contact persons themselves, structural strengthening of the networks' pedagogical services could help them to deal with this problem. In order to work in a more sustainable way, the contact persons also pleaded for measures to strengthen schools' and first-line workers' skills and capacities. It is ultimately they who have to translate insights into educational practice. Additionally, concerning the knowledge and expertise that have been generated as part of the action plan over recent years, these could be more structurally anchored in teacher training programmes, textbooks and curricula. The disadvantage of many training courses is that they often consist of a short-term intervention that mainly reaches already motivated teachers. Moreover, one-off study days and training do not immediately change the organisational culture of the schools to which teachers return after the training. Finally, due to a lack of systematic evaluations of specific actions and projects, the question remains open as to what degree schools' and teachers' skills and competencies were effectively strengthened through the many actions of the Flemish action plan.

Continuing Flemish PVE-E policy in a sustainable way?

As demonstrated above, since 2015 the scope of Flanders' PVE-E policy has gradually been broadened. The Flemish education system now approaches the issues of violent radicalisation and

polarisation based on a broad pedagogical approach. This approach emphasises the intrinsic value of good education instead of focusing one-sidedly on a security-driven approach. Now that Flemish PVE-E policies have been in operation for a number of years, the question arises as to how the Flemish government and the education system should continue their efforts to address radicalisation and polarisation. Based on the interviews conducted with the contact persons in the administration and the education networks, it is possible to distinguish three dimensions that are important to key stakeholders in the Flemish education system.

A first important point that was shared among the contact persons is that the focus of a continued Flemish PVE-E policy should not only be on jihadism but also on other forms of violent extremism. Since 2018, the contact persons had picked up more and more signs of right-wing extremism in schools, such as racist remarks, Facebook groups in which pupils share hate messages, the display of Nazi symbols and so on.⁴⁶ The contact persons identified similarities with the signals and processes of Islamic radicalisation:

"From a pedagogical point of view I think it's all very similar – it's about expressing extremist, very radical views ... where you feel you are at least crossing a line about what we tolerate in society."⁴⁷

In some instances, the contact persons had the feeling that signals concerning right-wing extremism seemed to cause less concern among teachers than those concerning Islamic radicalisation. In other words, some schools seemed to be less quick to problematise the former signals:

"I do notice that when these kinds of reports come to me, ... a number of teachers in the school have been aware of it for a long time, but thought ... "they're teenagers, it's not that big a problem."⁴⁸

According to the contact persons, this approach entails certain risks. Addressing violent extremism

with double standards can promote stigmatisation and polarisation:

"You cannot use double standards, because then you create that breeding ground again."⁴⁹

A second point is that a continued Flemish PVE-E policy should not only pay attention to cultural and psychological aspects of violent radicalisation but also to the socio-economic dimensions underlying the phenomenon.⁵⁰ At the same time, the contact persons advocated that the plan should continue to be broad in scope and keep emphasising the importance of a contextual approach to resilience, the creation of a positive school climate and enhancing pupils' abilities to live together in a (super-) diverse society.

Finally, the contact persons also advocated the strengthening of partnerships beyond the sphere of education – for example, with organisations in the welfare sector and youth work. The 2017 action plan did try to facilitate collaborations between education and civil society organisations in various ways. According to various contact persons, however, this is still often not done to a sufficient degree. For example:

"I feel that we don't listen enough to youth workers ... These boys and girls go to youth work organisations on Wednesday afternoons with all their frustrations and problems from school ... and they then formulate a response. I think ... we have too little contact with them."⁵¹

Conclusion

As in many preventive programmes to tackle extremism and terrorism, education plays an important role in the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation and polarisation. Since 2015, a host of actions and interventions have been developed for and implemented in the Flemish education system. Important objectives of the 2015 plan were to enhance cooperation and strengthen expertise regarding how to deal with violent radicalisation and polarisation. Analysis shows that the Flemish effort to prevent violent radicalisation in education contexts builds on a broad pedagogical approach. The intrinsic values of good education and of enhancing resilience in pupils and schools are emphasised over a one-sided, security-driven approach to the problem. In the first phase of the action plan, in the immediate aftermath of the departure of young people to war zones in Iraq and Syria and the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, a certain tension and a “security reflex” were apparent in the responses of education professionals to discourses and behaviours of pupils that they perceived as problematic. However, in the following years, the approach gradually broadened. In the implementation of the education-related actions of the plan, the attention shifted from tackling violent religious radicalisation to the broader task of creating inclusive and resilient schools in an increasingly (super-)diverse society. The education-related actions in the updated Flemish action plan of 2017 are based on a broad pedagogical approach that emphasises open, safe and inclusive school environments. Thus, the risks associated in the PVE-E literature with instrumentalisation and securitisation of education in the fight against radicalisation seem to be largely avoided in the Flemish education system.

Looking into how the actions in the Flemish action plan have been implemented in practice, it was clear that the picture is mixed. Although the action

plan has succeeded in achieving a number of its objectives, such as strengthening cooperation and enhancing expertise at the level of the administration and the networks, it is also possible to identify areas where effective and sustainable implementation of preventive actions has proved to be more challenging. Specific challenges have been linked, for example, to overburdened pedagogical and welfare service providers as well as to the sustainable safeguarding of the results of project-based interventions. Due to a lack of systematic evaluations of specific actions and projects, the question also remains open as to what degree teachers’ skills and competences were effectively strengthened through the many training programmes provided for and funded by the action plan.

Overall, the gradual broadening of the Flemish approach to violent extremism was positively evaluated by key stakeholders in the Flemish education system. A possible explanation for this observation might be linked to the fact that the 2017 Flemish action plan was developed and implemented in close cooperation with the main institutional players in the Flemish education system, chief among them the education networks responsible for providing education and organising schools. Both the administration, the contact persons in the networks and the PGC networks worked hard to disseminate vision texts, manuals, online tools and training that disseminated the broad pedagogical approach to radicalisation underlying the action plan as widely as possible in the Flemish education system. This created room for schools and teachers to deal with the grievances and ideals of pupils in a constructive and pedagogical way. A key takeaway from this analysis thus points to the importance of involving stakeholders in PVE-E policies as early as possible in the policy-making process. Although every national context has its own peculiarities, the Flemish case shows the value of deep involvement, participation and cooperation of key stakeholders from the education system in the development of policy as well as in its implementation. This makes it possible to engage education professionals on

their own merits, based on the intrinsic value of their work.

At the same time, however, this observation raises the question of whether such a broad pedagogical approach should still be part of a separate PVE-E policy or whether it should be an integral part of regular education policy. The contact persons who were interviewed perceived a certain tension here. On the one hand, they were aware of the possible side effects of working within a policy framework that is also inspired by security considerations. On

the other hand, in their view the action plan has produced momentum for practices such as democratic citizenship education and building inclusive and resilient school climates. Most of the contact persons who were interviewed were of the view that, in order for these efforts to be continued and strengthened in the Flemish education system, Flanders' PVE-E policies should be extended. In their view, however, this should be conditional on the further broadening of the scope of these policies.

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Flemish Peace Institute

The Flemish Peace Institute was established in 2004 as a para-parliamentary institution within the Flemish Parliament. It provides thorough analyses, informs and organizes the debate and promotes peace and the prevention of violence.

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