

RAN ISSUE PAPER

Discussing Taboos and Controversial Issues

Practical guidelines for youth workers

Summary

Society should provide youngsters with a safe space to discuss sensitive topics, such as sexual orientation, racism, political views, cultural differences, religion and mental health. The taboos and controversy that sometimes accompany these topics leave many parents and professionals unwilling to discuss them.

But ignoring these topics will not make them go away, and doing so can **create an opening for extremist milieus to provide answers**. Discussing taboos certainly means taking risks, but it also means taking responsibility for the psychological development of the generation to come. Youth work has a role to play in this.

This paper **offers youth workers accessible tips and methodologies to discuss taboos and controversial topics** with youngsters.

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Introduction

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture recently published: *'The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation'*⁽¹⁾. Meanwhile the British Council and SALTO Youth have issued a *'Young people and extremism pack'*⁽²⁾. These new publications add to a wealth of existing literature, including *'The preventative role of open youth work in radicalisation of open youth work'*⁽³⁾ by Werner Prinzjakowitsch. Producing another handbook was therefore considered redundant.

Instead, RAN YF&C chose to invest these resources in a practical way, in helping youth workers to execute (at least one of) the recommendations given in the existing handbooks. During the YF&C prep-meeting *'The role of youth work in PCVE'*⁽⁴⁾ (preventing/countering violent extremism) that took place in Amsterdam on 26 September 2017, youth workers and other experts debated contributions by DG EAC, SALTO etc. to PCVE, and looked at which PCVE objectives are currently the most pressing and challenging. The handbooks and toolkits provide extensive recommendations and tools, ranging from early prevention and group work, to prevention for individuals already under the influence of an extremist ideology.

To execute these recommendations, youth workers need to possess a wide array of skills and a certain depth of knowledge. This demands a lot from youth workers. To assist them where it is needed most, RAN YF&C discussed the full range of objectives and skills mentioned in the material available, and then prioritised them according to the extent to which they could benefit from additional efforts. Youth workers decided that discussing taboos and controversial topics with youngsters is one of the most pressing challenges, relevant throughout the EU. In discussing taboo topics, youngsters are also confronted with other values, and can be encouraged to assess their own and other opinions critically. These are key skills in building resilience to radicalisation⁽⁵⁾.

This paper addresses taboos and controversial topics: what are they? Why are taboo topics relevant for youth workers in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism? What are the challenges in discussing taboos and controversial topics? How can these challenges be overcome?

¹ DG EAC (2017).

² British Council & SALTO Youth (2017).

³ Prinzjakowitsch, W. (2017).

⁴ This was a preparatory meeting that addressed the programme and content for the large-scale meeting on 'The role of youth work in PCVE' on 6-7 December 2017.

⁵ Pp. 8-10, DG EAC (2017).

Taboo topics and radicalisation

“As a youth worker, you should not avoid discussing issues such as sexual orientation, racism, political views, cultural differences, religion or mental health issues. There are no taboo topics which cannot be discussed. Engage in a conversation which does not make young people feel embarrassed or rejected and discuss these topics with young people. But remember, listening is more important than answering.”⁽⁶⁾

Why is the discussion of taboo topics relevant in the prevention of radicalisation? And why should youth workers concern themselves with it? The RAN issue paper *‘The Root Causes of Violent Extremism’* underlines that there is no single cause or pathway into radicalisation and violent extremism. Instead, extremism can be best conceptualised as a kaleidoscope of factors, creating infinite individual combinations⁽⁷⁾. Unsurprisingly this means that discussing taboo topics will by no means prevent the radicalisation of all youngsters. However, there are several factors that may contribute to radicalisation, in which discussing taboo topics can play a preventative role.

The **culture- and identity crisis** as a root cause for radicalisation provides the most direct link with taboo topics. In particular for youngsters with experience of migration, cultural marginalisation can lead to alienation and a sense of a lack of belonging to either their home or their parents’ society or cultural background. This can then contribute to radicalisation. Youngsters coming-of-age are in touch with social circles that uphold different norms and values to those of their parents. Subjects considered taboo at home will find their way into the thoughts and life of the youngster via the internet, peers, the news, school and other channels. Different social circles with different norms and values can leave the youngster with questions and feeling conflicted: Where do I belong? This identity crisis is deepened if the youngster is confronted with **social factors** such as social exclusion; marginalisation and discrimination. This combined with **political factors**, which may for instance include grievances framed around victimhood linked to national migration policies, may push the youngster away from mainstream society. These factors can be a push factor for all forms of extremism: right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and religiously inspired extremism.

If there is no safe space to discuss these questions and concerns, youngsters will look for answers elsewhere. **This creates an opening for on- and offline recruitment by extremist milieus.** Society should therefore provide a safe space to discuss these sensitive topics. Youth workers are not solely responsible for this: family members, teachers, community leaders and many others can play a part. However, discussing taboo topics is challenging, and individuals are often confronted by their own taboos and norms, which can make them feel uncomfortable in discussions with others. Youth workers are particularly well positioned to discuss these topics: the value of youth work lies in its flexibility when addressing youngsters’ reality⁽⁸⁾. Unlike with parents or teachers, contact with youth workers is voluntary. This puts the youngster on a more equal footing in relation to the youth worker, which can make a difference if the youth worker is seeking to support a young person as he or she deals with the challenges of growing up in a complex, pluralistic modern society. Before going into the challenges and solutions for discussing taboos and controversial topics in depth, it is important to understand more about the phenomenon itself.

⁶ p. 21, DG EAC (2017).

⁷ p. 3, RAN CoE (2016).

⁸ p. 59, DG EAC (2017).

What are taboos?

Asked about the kinds of taboo topics encountered in their professional lives, youth workers around Europe came up with the following topics ⁽⁹⁾:

Sexuality (including homosexuality), domestic violence, religion, homelessness, societal expectations, alcohol abuse, drugs, foreign policy, abortion, poverty, discrimination.

Taboos can be found in words, gestures, topics, social and cultural behaviour and body language, but are not limited to these. The Oxford English Dictionary defines them as “*Prohibition, generally of the use or practice of anything*”, and in terms of linguistics, as “*A total or partial prohibition of the use of certain words, expressions, topics, etc., especially in social intercourse*” ⁽¹⁰⁾. Freud distinguished between two categories of taboos: the first defines taboos as something divine, that should be treated with respect and not violated. The second can be associated with the overall fear of breaking a ‘sacred’ taboo ⁽¹¹⁾. A group punishes members if they do not respect a taboo because disrespecting taboos means putting the group’s ordered structure at risk. The existence of taboos makes people feel safer by conveying a feeling of organisation, order and security. Taboos aim at guiding social behaviour, which is indeed similar to the function of laws ⁽¹²⁾.

Closely related to taboos are controversial topics. In ‘*Teaching controversial issues*’ (Council of Europe, 2015), controversial topics are defined as “*issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society*” ⁽¹³⁾. As many of the challenges and solutions for discussing taboos and controversial issues are very similar, this paper will use both terms. Stradling (1984) does draw a distinction between issues that are superficially controversial and those that are inherently controversial. The former, in principle at least, are open to solution as they appeal to evidence. The latter derive from disagreements based on matters of fundamental belief or value judgement and are much more intractable ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Taboos confront us everywhere and constantly. But taboos also vary from culture to culture, and they change as societies change. What used to be taboo 50 years ago might no longer be today. Taboos are the “*result of a tradition set up by paternal and social authority*” ⁽¹⁵⁾. They are anchored in our minds, which does not mean that they are still relevant and true; but this makes it very difficult for us (impossible for some) to break or overcome them. This is especially challenging for youngsters in the process of shaping their own identity: as they come of age, they are confronted with differences between what is taboo in different social circles. A topic that is considered taboo by the parents might be completely normal in pop-culture or among friends. This leads to a dilemma for the youngsters: which opinions and norms are a part of the young person’s identity? Which are not? This confusion can leave a youngster with questions, and no safe space to discuss them.

⁹ Responses by invitees to the RAN YF&C meeting ‘The role of youthwork in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism’ 6-7 December, Vienna (AT).

¹⁰ Kaye, Paul (online).

¹¹ p. 92, Freud, S. as cited in Trans. A. & A. Brill (2010).

¹² p. 41, Muller, F. (2015).

¹³ p. 9, Council of Europe (2015).

¹⁴ p. 2, Stradling, R. et al. (1984).

¹⁵ p. 32, Freud, S. as cited in Trans. A. & A. Brill (2010).

Discussing taboos and controversial topics: challenges and solutions

To prevent youngsters from looking for answers in an extremist milieu, society should provide them with an opportunity to discuss difficult topics in a secure environment. But such discussions are a sensitive matter, and there are many challenges to overcome as a professional:

1. dealing with your own personal bias
2. the risk of being offensive
3. complexity and a lack of knowledge
4. dealing with embarrassment (when discussing sex)
5. tensions within the group
6. parental concerns
7. unwillingness among professionals

Although there is no quick fix for these challenges, there are methodologies and tools, mostly from the field of education and communication, that can help youth workers equip themselves better. For solutions, we draw heavily on the paper *'Teaching Controversial topics'* by the Council of Europe (2015), as well as *'Controversial Issues and Taboos in the Classroom'* by Fabienne Muller (2015). Although both papers are written for formal education, youth workers and other experts in the field of informal education agreed that many of the challenges, lessons and recommendations are highly relevant for their sector⁽¹⁶⁾.

Challenge 1: Dealing with your own personal bias

Everyone has topics and issues that they consider to be taboo and controversial, including youth workers. Having your own opinion does not mean you cannot discuss and explore these topics with youngsters. But it can influence the discussion, and probably will. Not being aware of your own bias is therefore problematic.

Furthermore, discussing a controversial issue is different from discussing an agreed body of knowledge. There is no standing outside a controversial issue and approaching it with the distance that may be appropriate or possible with other topics. The discussion is always influenced by the attitudes and opinions that youngsters and the youth worker bring to the table; as such, it can never be neutral⁽¹⁷⁾. How can you discuss such a topic, without choosing sides? Is it still possible to moderate an open discussion if your own opinion is known?

Possible solutions:

First of all, youth workers should be **aware** of the topics and opinions they consider taboo and controversial themselves. Before discussing sensitive topics with youngsters, it is important to explore these topics, and even discuss them with colleagues.

¹⁶ RAN YF&C 'The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation' 6-7 December 2017, Vienna (AT).

¹⁷ p. 15, Council of Europe (2015).

Not everyone agrees that minimising your personal bias is necessary for discussing these topics, or even desirable. Fabienne Muller (2015) argues that professionals should show youngsters the necessity to accept and tolerate other people's points of view. It is almost impossible to stay neutral anyway because teachers "*implicitly communicate their views through sarcasm, tone of voice, and line of questioning*" ⁽¹⁸⁾. Werner Prinzjakowitsch (2017) underlines this as a crucial element of open youth work "*Develop one's own standpoint and also be able to clearly express it. This can serve as a counter-narrative but it also stimulates the articulation and the promotion of one's own interests, which is beneficial for young people.*" ¹⁹⁾

But there are approaches that can be of help if you want to appear neutral. Stradling (1984) identified several relevant **teaching styles** that can be used to moderate discussions while minimising the risk of a personal bias ⁽²⁰⁾. These approaches are intended for the classroom, but can be of use for youth workers as well:

1. **'Official line' approach** – this requires the teacher to promote the side dictated by public authorities. While this can give the teaching official legitimacy and protect the teacher from recriminations from the authorities, if the teacher has a different view, he or she may feel compromised and it may lead students to think that their own discussions are irrelevant because there is only one view that counts.
2. **'Neutral chairperson' approach** – this requires the teacher not to express any personal views or allegiances whatsoever, but to act only as a facilitator of discussion. While this may help to reduce the chance of undue teacher influence, it can be difficult to sustain, especially when ill-informed views are being expressed, and may sometimes have the effect of reinforcing existing attitudes and prejudice. It can also cast doubt on a teacher's credibility within the class.
3. **'Balanced' approach** – this requires the teacher to present students with a wide range of alternative views on an issue, as persuasively as possible, without revealing their own view. While this has the advantage of showing that issues are not two dimensional, and can introduce ideas and arguments that students may not otherwise consider, it can also give the impression that all opinions are equally sound and grounded in the evidence. It may also mean allowing the expression of some very extreme positions that may do no more than reinforce existing prejudices.
4. **'Devil's advocate' approach** – this requires the teacher to consciously take up the opposite position to the one expressed by students. While this has the advantage of ensuring a range of viewpoints are expressed and taken seriously, students may mistakenly identify the teacher with some of the views expressed. If particular positions are argued too well, this may also reinforce existing prejudices.

¹⁸ p. 26, Muller, F. (2015).

¹⁹ p. 78, Prinzjakowitsch, Werner (2017).

²⁰ p. 112-113, Stradling, R et al. (1984).

5. **‘Stated commitment’ approach** – this requires teachers to make their own views known at some point in the exploration of an issue. While this helps students to become aware of and take account of the teacher’s prejudices and biases and gives them a model of how to respond to a controversial issue, it may also lead them into accepting a view simply because it is their teacher’s.
6. **‘Ally’ approach** – this requires the teacher to take the side of a student or a group of students. While this can help weaker students or marginalised groups to have a voice and show them how arguments may be built on and developed, it can also give other students the impression that the teacher is simply using it to promote his or her own view, or be seen as evidence of favouritism by the teacher.

Challenge 2: Risk of being offensive

Taboos are taboo for a reason. They are areas of language and topics which are prohibited by a group, and discussing these in a wrong matter risks offending someone’s deepest values: religious, political, sexual and moral. The result of allowing everyone the freedom to say what they think about an issue is that the moderator gives the ‘official’ seal of approval to the expression of a whole range of extreme views⁽²¹⁾. Someone may also feel under attack from the professional leading the discussion, either they perceive that the subject portrays them in a bad light, or through the branding of their sincerely-held opinions as inappropriate or ‘politically incorrect’.

The risk in these situations is that youngsters practise self-censorship or even withdraw all together⁽²²⁾. During the YF&C prep-meeting *‘The role of youth work in PCVE’*, one of the main concerns among participants was the fear that discussing taboo topics could result in losing contact with the youngster. Addressing such sensitive matters in a wrong way, could potentially ruin the carefully constructed relationship: *“An individual who has violated a taboo becomes himself taboo because he has the dangerous property of tempting others of following his example. He arouses envy; why should he be allowed to do or mention what is prohibited to others? He is therefore really contagious, in so far as every example incites to imitation, and therefore he himself must be avoided.”*⁽²³⁾

Possible solutions:

Firstly, a youth worker should be aware of issues that could be offensive to the youngster. Hence, it is important that the youth worker is at least to some extent familiar with the youngster before the discussion. **Take your time and do not discuss too much, too soon.**

²¹ p. 17, Council of Europe (2015).

²² p. 18, Council of Europe (2015).

²³ p. 37, Freud, S. as cited in Trans. A. & A. Brill(2010).

Steinberg (2004) underlines that there must first be a sense of intimacy, before taboo topics are discussed. ⁽²⁴⁾

Secondly, youngsters **should not be forced into these discussions**. If possible, provide examples of the topics that might be discussed and acknowledge that these discussions may be uncomfortable or distressing for some. Suggest that youngsters speak with you beforehand if they feel uncomfortable about participating in the discussion and respect their choice not to participate ⁽²⁵⁾. Fabienne Muller (2015) states it is important to young adults to take responsibility and to decide for themselves what is good for them, in order that they feel respected ⁽²⁶⁾.

But even in a situation with a sense of intimacy and voluntary participation, discussions can become emotional and offensive to participants. Stradling (1984) identifies four ‘**strategies**’ in shaping discussions that can help to overcome this ⁽²⁷⁾:

- **Distancing** – introduce analogies and parallels (geographical, historical or imaginary) when an issue is highly sensitive within the class, school or local community.
- **Compensatory** – introduce new information, ideas or arguments when students express strongly beliefs based on ignorance, when the minority is being bullied by the majority, or when there is an unquestioning consensus.
- **Empathetic** – introduce activities to help students see an issue from someone else’s perspective. This can be done particularly when groups that are unpopular with some or all of the students are involved, when the issue includes prejudice or discrimination against a particular group, or when the issue is remote for the students.
- **Exploratory** – introduce enquiry-based or problem-solving activities when an issue is not well defined or particularly complex.

Two additional strategies have been advocated more recently ⁽²⁸⁾:

- **De-personalising** – introduce society- (rather than person-) orientated language when presenting an issue – e.g., substituting ‘us’, ‘our’, ‘someone’, or ‘society’ for ‘you’ or ‘your’ when addressing students, especially when some or all students have a personal connection with an issue and feel particularly sensitive about it.
- **Engaging** – introduce personally relevant or otherwise highly engaging material or activities when students are apathetic and express no opinions or feelings about an issue.

²⁴ p. 103-105, Steinberg, D. (2004).

²⁵ p. 1, Response Ability initiative (2014).

²⁶ p. 63, Muller, F. (2015).

²⁷ p. 42, Stradling, R et al. (1984).

²⁸ p. 21, Council of Europe (2015).

Challenge 3: Complexity and a lack of knowledge

Controversial issues embody major conflicts of value and interest, often coupled with disputed claims about underlying facts. These topics tend to be complex and have no easy answers. How can you discuss these complex issues even-handedly without detailed background knowledge or trustworthy sources of evidence? How can these topics be discussed without the youth worker feeling unequipped or vulnerable ⁽²⁹⁾?

Possible solutions:

The co-chair of RAN YF&C, Werner Prinzjakowitsch, states, *“No one would argue that you have to be a former drug-addict in order to discuss the topic of drug abuse with youngsters.”* Basic knowledge will be useful but **there is no need to be an experienced expert** on a topic in order to discuss it. It is also about being comfortable with a topic as a professional.

Although complexity is a challenge, Steinberg (2004) underlines that discussing taboo topics may sometimes also provide an **opportunity for factual knowledge**, as taboo topics can be surrounded by myths and misconceptions ⁽³⁰⁾.

The complex and fluid nature of many controversial issues have led to suggestions that, in some cases at least, the moderator should eschew the role of ‘knowledgeable expert’ and opt instead for teaching through some form of enquiry- or problem-based learning ⁽³¹⁾. **Instead of being the expert, you become a facilitator**, which assists students in engaging in the debate.

Clarke (2001) offers a strategy for teaching controversial public issues based on four questions that **encourage participants to look at an issue from different angles** and providing a basis for making a thoughtful judgement ⁽³²⁾:

- What is the issue about?
- What are the arguments?
- What is assumed?
- How are the arguments manipulated?

Sometimes a discussion does reach a level in which the expertise of a specialist is beneficial. Fabienne Muller (2015) provides an example in which she discusses suicide with her class. This is indeed a very complex subject that needs to be planned and handled with care: *“Even though the teacher might be adequately prepared, it is probably wise to rely on professional help to discuss it with teenagers.”* ⁽³³⁾

²⁹ p. 46, Council of Europe (2015).

³⁰ p. 107, Steinberg, D. (2004).

³¹ p. 25 Council of Europe (2015).

³² Clarke, P. (2001).

³³ p. 72, Muller, F. (2015).

Challenge 4: Dealing with embarrassment (when discussing sex)

While some taboo topics and opinions might be considered offensive, other topics may be difficult to discuss because youngsters are simply too embarrassed to speak up. Fabienne Muller (2015) writes: *“Discussions about sex, especially with the teacher and classmates, are considered very embarrassing by teenagers. I was aware that it would probably be difficult to make the students feel at ease and overcome their inhibitions to be able to have meaningful class discussions.”* ⁽³⁴⁾

Again the feelings of the professional him or herself play a role: *“Youth workers have traditionally avoided raising sexual health issues with young people, due in part to concerns about their own lack of knowledge”*, Harrison & Dempsey (1998) ⁽³⁵⁾.

Possible solutions:

In her study, Fabienne Muller (2015) uses the book *‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’* to discuss taboo topics in her classroom. This somewhat helped students discuss sex, as they could paraphrase scenes, instead of being forced to formulate their own words. Encouraging students to use the correct anatomical vocabulary for a sexual experience made the class discussion more light-hearted, but did not eliminate the teenagers’ embarrassment. A book discussion might not be a viable tool for a youth club, but a youth worker can **provide material** that helps youngsters to formulate their questions or remarks.

Janssen & Davies (2009) suggest the **PLISSIT** model of sexual counselling ⁽³⁶⁾. The acronym PLISSIT refers to four levels of intervention, commencing with lower-level intervention and progressing to a more developed intervention requiring a greater level of knowledge, training and skill:

1. **Permission-giving stage.** Permission-giving is a way of communicating to the young person that the worker is open to discussing the subject of relationships and sexual health. The permission-giving component, or message, can be communicated in a number of ways. – by leaving leaflets around the agency promoting safe sex, for instance, but also by raising impersonal questions on the topic. It is also vital to reassure youngsters that everything discussed will be **treated with confidentiality**. If confidentiality concerns and limitations are not addressed, effective permission-giving will not be established. This applies to discussions on all taboos and controversial topics.
2. **The Limited Information stage** reflects the important role of youth workers as an information source for young people. This stage involves the crucial functions of

³⁴ p. 78, Muller, F.(2015).

³⁵ p. 34, Harrison & Dempsey (1998).

³⁶ P. 22, Janssen & Davies (2009).

clarifying misinformation, dispelling myths and giving factual information in a limited manner. It is at this stage that the youth worker should become familiar with more detailed information and youth-friendly resources, including websites and games related to sexual health. Janssen & Davies (2009) provide several relevant options ⁽³⁷⁾.

3. **The Specific Suggestion** model involves the worker discussing issues of sex, sexuality and relationships on a deeper level, rather than merely providing basic information on risky sexual behaviour, safe sex or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Annon 1976). This stage is only likely to be reached when a more developed relationship is in place between the youngster and the youth worker. The model involves exploring relationships or sexuality issues at a deeper level. It is also characterised by the encouragement of reflection by the young person ⁽³⁸⁾.
4. **Intensive Therapy** This is the most advanced stage of the PLISSIT model; it involves the exploration of deeper level psychological issues or past trauma (Annon 1976). Few youth workers will have sufficient training and expertise to provide this type of support and intervention and will instead refer clients to specialists such as sexual health or sexual assault counsellors or adolescent counsellors and psychologists.

Challenge 5: Tensions within the group

As taboos and controversial topics can arouse strong feelings and divide opinion, there is a chance that discussions between youngsters can over-heat. Dealing with insensitive remarks is another challenge. This is likely to lead to other youngsters feeling offended, harassed or marginalised, causing hostilities and divisions, and leading to youngsters withdrawing from the conversation ⁽³⁹⁾.

There is also the fear that heated discussions could damage the professional. Losing control of a situation can undermine one's authority. Philpott et al (2013) found that negativity by students towards their peers when discussing different points of view was a major concern among teachers. In a study, teachers reported that students often became emotional and felt attacked when they perceived comments made by classmates as personally offensive, which may limit the feeling of talking in a safe space. This was found to be especially the case in discussions relating to religion and intercultural issues ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Although the position of authority is less obvious in informal education, youth workers at the RAN YF&C meeting still agreed that this fear is very relevant in their profession ⁽⁴¹⁾.

³⁷ p. 27, Janssen & Davies (2009).

³⁸ Annon, J. (1976).

³⁹ p. 17, Council of Europe (2015).

⁴⁰ p. 18, Council of Europe (2015).

⁴¹ RAN YF&C 'The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation' 6-7 December 2017, Vienna (AT).

Possible solutions:

First of all, **not everything can and should be discussed in an open group setting**: *“Though I am convinced that speaking in public helps our teenagers to become self-confident and more mature, it might not always be the best method to tackle taboo topics in class. Group work would be an option, as the more reserved students might have fewer difficulties discussing taboos in groups among their classmates than in a whole-class discussion.”* Fabienne Muller (2015) ⁽⁴²⁾.

When discussing taboos and controversial topics in a group, it is important to **set clear rules** on communication. Establishing of codes of conduct or rules for how students should behave when there is disagreement over an issue are regarded as the key to the creation of this kind of atmosphere, frequently conceived in terms of ‘ground rules’ for discussion ⁽⁴³⁾. Fabienne Muller (2015) provides examples such as: no swearing, confidentiality, let people talk, be polite ⁽⁴⁴⁾. The Bounce scoping paper by Arktos (2014) lists steps to take if these rules and boundaries are violated ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

It can also help to *“strike while the iron is cold”* ⁽⁴⁶⁾. When emotions are too high, it can be hard to stay calm and have a constructive dialogue. **Try to pick a time when everyone is calm.**

Structured discussion methods can diffuse situations and encourage students to think more rationally and less emotionally ⁽⁴⁷⁾. The Center for Research and Teaching (CRLT) recommends several techniques to structure a discussion ⁽⁴⁸⁾:

- **Identify a clear purpose** – starting a discussion with clearly articulated objectives can help shape the nature of the discussion. as the objectives could be raising awareness, identifying a core problem underlying social conflicts, or exploring possible consequences or implications of a conflict.
- **Provide a common base for understanding** – you can start with a video clip or article to prompt discussion. This will provide participants with a common basis from which to react.
- **Create a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow** – because any social conflict or controversy is a complex topic, it is important to create a framework for the discussion in addition to having clearly defined objectives. You can for instance prepare specific questions to use if the discussion stops.

⁴² p. 91, Muller, F. (2015).

⁴³ p. 21, Council of Europe (2015).

⁴⁴ p. 68, Muller, F. (2015).

⁴⁵ p. 33, Arktos (2014).

⁴⁶ Wilkens, C. & Kosanke, N. (2014).

⁴⁷ p. 10, Crombie & Rowe (2009).

⁴⁸ CRLT (2016).

- **Be an active facilitator** – in order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, it is important to be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer. Be careful to maintain some control but do not over-control. Your role as an active facilitator can include rewording questions posed by students, correcting misinformation, making reference to relevant reading materials or course content, asking for clarification, and reviewing the main points.
- **Summarise discussion and gather student feedback** – it is very important to conclude by summarising the main points of the discussion. Students are more likely to feel that a discussion was valuable if the instructor, with the help of the class, synthesises what has been shared or identifies the key issues explored.
- **Plan other activities around a topic** – instead of using debate as a way of looking into a topic, use it as a finale of a series of idea-generating activities for youngsters, such as role-play, drama, simulations, etc. ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The first three techniques listed above will be easier to apply in a controlled classroom setting than in the dynamic setting in which a youth worker operates. The framework and purpose of a discussion can be more easily prepared in a set curriculum. A teacher also has a greater range of means to stimulate the youngsters so that they follow the structure of such discussions, whereas a youth worker has to rely on the motivation of the youngster.

Challenge 6: Parental concerns

Some topics and opinions are considered taboo by parents. This is precisely why it is important for youth work to provide a safe space in which to discuss such topics. But discussing topics that parents do not want to be discussed can lead to concerns and complaints. Parents might feel that youth workers are not in a position to discuss these subjects.

How should youth workers deal with parents' anxieties (and those of others) who regarding the appropriateness of discussing difficult issues in the youth club and/or of the ways in which they are addressed. ⁽⁵⁰⁾

Possible solutions:

The most important argument to convince parents that these topics should be discussed comes from the author of *'The Perks of Being a Wallflower'*, by Stephen Chbosky: *"With the way that society is now, parents should prefer some of these issues to be discussed in a much more structured setting, as opposed to keeping them in the dark. They should deal with the*

⁴⁹ p. 35, Council of Europe (2015).

⁵⁰ p. 12, Council of Europe (2015)

subjects they have already been, or will be faced with in order to better know how to handle them.⁽⁵¹⁾

These topics are part of life, and youngsters are confronted with them. **Ignoring these topics will not make the questions go away.**

Fabienne Muller (2015) suggests a way to inform and involve parents that does not require intensive collaboration. She simply provides students and parents with cards containing her **contact details**. Parents can then contact her if they are too concerned.⁽⁵²⁾

Although a proactive approach towards parents is not common practice in youth work, this could be applied when the situation demands it.

Challenge 7: Unwillingness among professionals

Youth work is challenging as it is. There is a tendency to see youth work as a means to attain an abundance of educational and societal objectives. Or as one of the participants at the RAN YF&C meeting mentioned asked, *“When can youngsters just be youngsters, and have fun?”*⁽⁵³⁾. Discussing taboos and controversial topics would add yet another task to the load.

Additionally, discussing taboo topics asks a great deal of youth workers. Some youth workers may find this daunting and be unwilling to take this on. Fabienne Muller (2015) has noticed an unwillingness among fellow professionals: *“Especially my male colleagues said that they would not want to foist any problems and that in the society we live in, these topics were too compromising and difficult to handle. It was quite apparent that they wanted to avoid any kind of trouble and were too unsure about the consequences.”*⁽⁵⁴⁾ Lastly, youth workers might be personally uncomfortable with these topics, which would discourage them from wanting to discuss these topics with others.

Possible solutions:

First and foremost, it is important to state that discussing taboo and controversial topics is not an additional task. It is **inseparable from the primary objectives of youth work**: to empower youngsters to become active citizens⁽⁵⁵⁾. The discussion of taboo topics will not only contribute to the prevention of radicalisation, but will serve a much broader purpose: it will help youngsters gain the skills and competences which help them to deal with the challenges of growing up in a complex, pluralistic and modern society. As Fabienne Muller concludes, *“While teaching taboos certainly means taking risks, it also means taking responsibility for the psychological development of the generation to come.”*⁽⁵⁶⁾

⁵¹ p. 84, Muller, F. (2015)

⁵² p. 85, Muller, F. (2015)

⁵³ RAN YF&C prep-meeting ‘The role of youthwork in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism’ 26 September, Amsterdam (NL)

⁵⁴ p. 84, Muller, F. (2015)

⁵⁵ p. 17, DG EAC (2017)

⁵⁶ p. 94, Muller, F. (2015)

This is not a new objective for youth work, and responses from youth workers within RAN prove that many youth workers already consider this their responsibility and part of their daily job. But it is important that **youth work organisations provide a work environment in which discussing taboo topics is addressed and encouraged**. One of the ways in which youth centres can organise this is by discussing methodologies and experiences in this domain in **supervision and interVision Sessions**. InterVision is a way to analyse work-related problems with a group and to look for possible solutions or alternative behaviours.⁽⁵⁷⁾ With supervision, this process happens under the guidance of a facilitator who has the required expertise in that field.

Conclusion

Providing youngsters with a safe space to discuss taboos and controversial topics is important in the prevention of radicalisation. While it is by no means the sole responsibility of youth workers, they are well positioned to contribute to this. For some youth workers this may already be part of their daily work and costs little effort, while for others it may be a new and challenging task. This paper hopefully provides assistance and inspiration for all youth workers in this part of their job. For more guidance on the role of youth work in the prevention radicalisation please consult the RAN YF&C ex post paper '*The role of youth work in the prevention of radicalisation*'.⁽⁵⁸⁾

⁵⁷ p. 1, Van Zelm, Gerda (2011)

⁵⁸ RAN YF&C ex post (2017)

Appendix: References

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