
Long-Term Experience Means Professionalization – Or Does It? An in-depth look on the Involvement of Former Extremists in German Prevention and Education

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Abstract

The utilization of former extremists in preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism has increased internationally. Nonetheless, the question of professionalization in these fields regarding the formers themselves is controversial. However, the issue of staff professionalization within P/CVE organizations and structures has been neglected. This article closely examines the degree of professionalization in the German context, especially regarding school-based P/CVE interventions, with more than twenty-year experience with such tools. The authors conducted interviews with representatives of four German organizations known to facilitate former-based P/CVE workshops as part of their portfolios. In summary, the findings indicate the need for improvement in professionalization.

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Introduction

Globally, the use of former extremists in preventing and countering radicalization² and violent extremism (P/CVE)³ has increased in recent years (Koehler, 2020); for example, in multiplier trainings, counter-narratives, and exit work (cf. Christensen 2015; RAN 2017). This also

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² In accordance with Horgan (2009, pp. 151 et seq.), radicalization is “the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology”.

³ “CVE is a realm of policy, programmes and interventions designed to reduce the terrorist threat through non-coercive approaches that directly address its root causes. CVE focuses mainly on countering the activities of existing violent extremists. Preventing violent extremism is broader than CVE, focusing on preventative approaches allowing for programming to take a broader approach to the underlying drivers that create vulnerabilities to VE.” (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018, p. 16).

includes their involvement in the prevention of violent extremism through education (PVE-E), which has developed into a predominant feature of national strategies against violent extremism (VE) worldwide (cf. Niemi et al., 2018; Stephens et al., 2019). However, there is a gap in research on both the direct and indirect effects of education on VE (cf. de Silva, n.d.) and the effects of former extremists' involvement in PVE (cf. Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020; Scrivens et al., 2020a; Lewis & Marsden, 2021). As there is a positive perception of utilizing formers in PVE-E even by the UNESCO, the increase in worldwide adoption of the approach is hardly surprising (cf. UNESCO, 2017, p. 48; 2018, p. 4).

In Germany, it has been a common practice to organize PVE in schools (mainly on a primary preventive level) with former right-wing extremists since the early 2000s; and more recently, with people from other extremist milieus (e.g., Gansewig & Walsh, 2021). To echo Wagner, the co-founder of the German exit program for neo-Nazis, EXIT-Germany, the number of schools requesting such interventions with formers has increased significantly since 2001, "especially as financial means can be obtained for this. The format has obviously established itself in a largely positive discussion"⁴ (Wagner, 2020, p. 48). Congruently, proponents argue that former extremists, with their biographical background, can authentically illustrate the risks and outcomes of getting involved in extremism while focusing, in particular, on theoretical considerations with respect to education and deterrence. Notwithstanding, the actual impact as well as the implementation of these PVE activities have received minimal attention thus far (cf. Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20, p. 2; Koehler, 2020, p. 16). The authors of this paper have repeatedly highlighted research gaps and the need for improvement in this area. To address this, we conducted a large-scale research project between March 2017 and December 2019.⁵ During the course of this project, we identified the following main characteristics of this field: (1) contrary to previous assumptions, there were no clearly documented positive effects of the evaluated school-based PVE seminar of a

⁴ This and all following direct quotes from German original sources were translated by the authors.

⁵ The overall results of the research project have been published in Gansewig & Walsh, 2020.

former right-wing extremist on the students when compared to a control group; (2) there were multiple questionable aspects of these PVE activities in Germany (cf. Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, 2021, in preparation). For instance, some of the formers involved in the workshops did not exit extremism voluntarily and/or had not completed their disengagement/deradicalization⁶ process. Furthermore, the research project revealed a lack of transparency and demonstrated that there were no publicly available quality standards in the field prior to spring 2018 (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020).

In general, the training required by formers involved in CVE has been debated (cf. Christensen, 2015; Davey et al., 2018; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019; Wagner & Wichmann, 2019). Koehler argues that providing professional training to formers could bind them to their label as “former extremists” indefinitely, thereby exacerbating the risk of establishing “professional formers” (Koehler, 2020, pp. 16 et seq.). This argument also applies to formers involved in PVE-E, as a biography-based approach in class also has highly specific requirements for all parties involved (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 78 et seq.). Therefore, one must ask how professionalization can be assessed in this context. Directly connected to this is the issue of professionalization procedures within organizations that facilitate such interventions. Given the debate about the training of former extremists in P/CVE and since these programs generally work in a highly sensitive area, especially when conducted with adolescents, it is equally relevant, for example, to explore how those organizations understand and practice the training of their own formers conducting such workshops. In this respect, the authors explored the degree of professionalization in German P/CVE, especially in PVE-E. We approached this question by interviewing actors in the field—not formers themselves but the providers that are responsible for initiating, providing, and conducting professionalization.

⁶ In accordance with Horgan (2009, pp. 151 et seq.), disengagement refers to the behavioral level whereas deradicalization describes changes regarding attitudes.

Method and Limitations

To shed light on how professionalization of formers conducting PVE-E workshops is framed and achieved, we performed four semi-structured face-to-face interviews between January and June 2018 with program representatives of organizations providing such services.⁷ In line with our ethical consent procedure, all interviewees were informed about the research project, the interview topic, the option to stop the interview at any time, individual anonymity, and data protection prior to the interviews. The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' locations of choice. All interviewees provided informed consent to be interviewed. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and conducted in the presence of at least two project staff members. As agreed, direct quotes attributable to one specific institution as well as their contextualization were submitted to the interview partners for approval.

We interviewed one representative each from the non-profit organization *EXIT-Germany*⁸, the association *Project 21 II*⁹, and the *Working Group on Right-Wing Extremism and Violence (Arbeitsstelle Rechtsextremismus und Gewalt [ARUG])*¹⁰, as well as employees of the *Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial*¹¹. All four institutions work with former extremists in educational settings. We identified these programs in our previous research and chose to speak to them, as (1) EXIT-Germany and Project 21 II are civil society organizations¹² with the longest experience in conducting those workshops, especially in

⁷ The talk duration was 109 minutes on average.

⁸ Date of the interview: 01/30/2018.

⁹ Date of the interview: 01/31/2018.

¹⁰ Date of the interview: 02/06/2018.

¹¹ Date of the interview: 04/27/2018.

¹² The prevention of political extremism in Germany is understood as a task for society as a whole, in which joint action by state and civil society/nongovernmental organizations at the federal, state and local levels is crucial (cf. Walsh & Gansewig, forthcoming). Consequently, there are numerous state and civil society structures and services at both the federal and state level as well as at the local and regional level (Gansewig, 2018, pp. 476 et seq.). Most projects carried out by civil society actors are (partially) financed by the state. According to a survey by the German Federal Criminal Police Office on extremism prevention, e.g., 60% of the 1.642 offerings

schools; (2) Berlin-Hohenschönhausen is the only organization in Germany that is known to work with a former left-wing extremist in PVE-E; (3) ARUG, established in the 1990s, is— with its exit program—a member of the *Federal Working Group Exit to Entry (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Ausstieg zum Einstieg [BAG])*^{13, 14} and was involved in the development of the quality standards for involving former extremists in educational work of the Federal Working Group, which has been published in the meantime (BAG, 2018). Except Project 21 II, all institutions are (co-)funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth.

The interviewees were first asked to report on their institution and its general position toward the involvement of former extremists in prevention and educational work. Furthermore, the contents, goals, and organization of PVE interventions were assessed. The questions focused on the selection of formers, their preparation, education and training, concepts and methods, and anticipated impacts and experiences with the format.

Our research on this novel field was guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strübing, 2014). Hence, the analysis was characterized by categorizing and coding the data, as well as continuously comparing data and codes beginning in the data collection phase. First, the interviews were structured in accordance with the guideline. We adopted a summary and excerpt-based approach using partial transcripts of the relevant segments. Additionally, we refined and subdivided the analysis scheme in an iterative process based on the interview material. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted based on the proposed scheme (see Figure 1). At least two project staff members engaged in different analysis steps.

The interview method has specific characteristics that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. Helfferich describes an interview as a “communication situation in which text is generated in an interactive manner” (2014, p. 561); interviews are necessarily

surveyed in 2018 were implemented at the municipal and state level by civil society organizations (Lützing et al., 2020, p. 602).

¹³ This is the nationwide umbrella organization of civil society actors involved in exit work regarding the extreme right-wing community. Its members are “approved institutes for children and youth welfare” (<https://www.bag-ausstieg.de/mitglieder/> [06/11/2021]).

¹⁴ EXIT-Germany is an associated partner of the BAG (<https://www.exit-deutschland.de/start/> [06/11/2021]).

subjective, context-bound, and shaped by the specific distribution of roles in the conversation (cf. *ibid.*). Moreover, in the case of face-to-face interviews, the possibility that the interviewees were unconsciously influenced by certain factors, such as characteristics of the voice or other personal factors of the interviewer, can never be ruled out (cf. Schaeffer et al., 2010, pp. 450 et seq.; Jäckle et al., 2013, pp. 7 et seq.).

Additionally, the scope of this analysis is limited because only employees of civil society organizations were interviewed. However, it should be noted that state authorities (such as Offices for the Protection of the Constitution)¹⁵ and independent organizers¹⁶ also conduct similar activities whose perspectives are not presented here. Although the analysis is based on four interviews, we consider it relevant to the field as (1) there is a general research gap on formers in PVE and (2) we took a new perspective on the matter.

Results

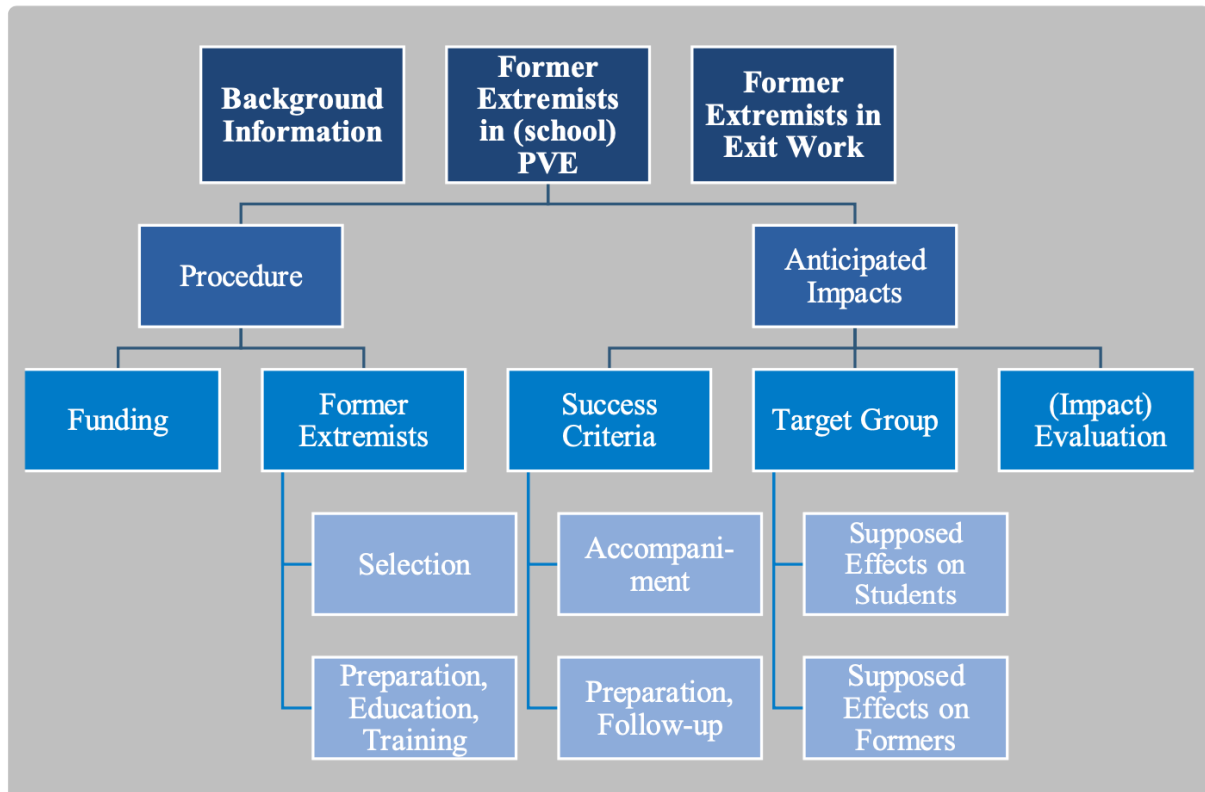
The results of the analysis are presented based on the scheme shown in Figure 1. In the first general section, brief *background information* on the four institutions is provided. Information presented beyond the interview contents is noted at the respective points. Furthermore, we describe the individual institutions' utilization of former extremists in such activities. The section on the analysis, titled *Former Extremists in (school) PVE*, is divided into procedures and anticipated impacts. In the subitem *procedure*, the financing of the assignment and the preconditions on the part of the formers are examined. *Anticipated Impacts* deals with the valuation and experiences of the interview partners regarding various aspects of effectiveness.

¹⁵ E.g., https://www.bige.bayern.de/beratung_und_bildung/km_und_bige/vortraege_und_workshops_an_schulen/index.html [05/25/2021]; <https://www.gegen-gewaltbereiten-salafismus.nrw/projekte/aussteigergespraech-prisma-251> [05/25/2021]. See also Pfeiffer & Schirmer, 2020; <https://www.kopfsache-moenchengladbach.de/de/projekt-kopfsache-mg.html#top-wrapper> [05/25/2021].

¹⁶ E.g., <https://www.dominicschmitz.de/> [03/14/2021]; <https://www.extremislos.de/> [03/14/2021]; <https://www.christianweissgerber.de/bildungsarbeit/> [03/14/2021].

Finally, the section on *former extremists in exit work* discusses the different positions in this discourse.

Figure 1: Analysis scheme



*Background Information*¹⁷

EXIT-Germany

EXIT-Germany is an initiative of the *Society Democratic Culture (Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur [ZDK])*. It offers counseling services and support to extremists who wish to leave an extremist movement. In the area of right-wing extremism, some former extremists are active as exit workers and/or in various facets of P/CVE. According to the

¹⁷ Direct quotes as well as their contextualization in this part of the analysis were submitted to the interview partners for approval.

interviewee, an action group linked to the ZDK made it possible for former extremists to become involved in these fields. At the time of the interview, approximately 30 people were active in this action group. Among other things, counter-narratives were used, which were distributed via a YouTube channel. Correspondingly, public appearances made by formers served to address extremist milieu members and/or had a primary preventive aim, depending on the setting. At the time of the interview, these activities were limited to former right-wing extremists, but the organizers also aimed to include former Salafists. Approximately 120 to 150 workshops with former extremists were held every year.¹⁸ Since 2001, 46 former right-wing extremists have been participating in PVE carried out by EXIT-Germany in schools, with about 15 people active at any time.

The interviewee stated that the organization did not specify the content or structural elements of the school workshops. Apart from a certain “director’s notion,” the configuration was at the discretion of the individual former. The first interventions took place in the company of an employee to check the messages, ideological statements, content, and methodology, and, if necessary, to make adjustments. The time frame was variable and depended on the schools’ preferences. The interview partner did not elaborate on standards underlying the work with former right-wing extremists in education upon request.

Project 21 II

The activities of Project 21 II are comparable to those of EXIT-Germany, concentrating on the Saxony region. The association was primarily dedicated to educational work, which has been carried out since 2001. The main target group of their PVE is young people, who can be mostly reached through schools. In principle, according to the interviewee, eighth grade students were the primary target group, but lectures were held as early as the fifth grade. The interventions were mainly conducted by one staff member and one or two former right-wing extremists. With regard to formers in PVE, the interview partner

¹⁸ These would take place in schools, youth clubs, Christian congregations, political education institutions, foundations, youth welfare offices, companies, etc.

named ten people who were “able and willing.” Following a basic concept, the school PVE workshops consisted of two parts: first, the social worker provided general information, such as the topics of right-wing extremism and disengagement/deradicalization. Thereafter, the main focus was on the participating former and his/her biography. The duration was about three school hours, whereby, in consultation with the students, regular breaks were usually dispensed with. The interviewee stated that the presence of teachers was indispensable for follow-up in class. Parental consent, however, usually played a subordinate role. In order not to “complicate” the process and, thus, limit their ability to act, the schools usually did not inform the parents, especially if the intervention took place on an ad hoc basis: “Individual parents play no role at all in the overall structure.” As the interviewee stated, the schools faced some criticism due to this, but it had no consequences for them.

Regarding quality standards of school PVE with former extremists, the interview partner named four points concerning the respective former, which he/she stated had been established by EXIT-Germany.¹⁹ First, formers involved in PVE were no longer allowed to be active in an extremist movement. Second, it was necessary that their outer appearance no longer resembled the typical appearance of the milieu. Third, extremist social contacts should steadily decrease during the disengagement/deradicalization process. Fourth, the person had to be open and honest, have a regular job, and, hence, have “arrived” in middle-class society.

Berlin Hohenschönhausen Memorial

The Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial is located at the former site of the central detention center of the Ministry of State Security of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).²⁰ Unlike the other three institutions, it is not a disengagement/deradicalization program, and it works with a former extremist solely for preventive and educational purposes. Among the four institutions, this was the only one whose activities concerned left-wing extremism. As part of the memorial’s study program, the model project *Left-wing Militancy in*

¹⁹ These standards were not addressed in the interview conducted with a representative of EXIT-Germany.

²⁰ Cf. <https://www.stiftung-hsh.de/ueber-uns/stiftung/gedenkstaette/> [02/09/2021].

History and the Present. Educating young people at risk about left-wing extremism and violence (Linke Militanz in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Aufklärung gefährdeter Jugendlicher über Linksextremismus und Gewalt) was being implemented, which primarily addressed young people between 16 and 27 years of age. It consisted of nine seminars. These essentially served to educate them on left-wing extremism and its development. According to the interviewees, the model project used a “peer group approach,” which was intended to promote independent examination of the topic, dialog and discussion while simultaneously raising awareness. The aim was to strengthen the democratic skills of the participants. As a “knowledge project,” the primary goal was to impart knowledge, in school classes for example.

Within the seminar titled *Left-wing extremism today – contemporary witnesses report (Linksextremismus heute – Zeitzeugen berichten)*, a former left-wing extremist had been engaged in the course of a so-called education week for a school class. First, the basic module was conducted to ensure an equal level of knowledge among the students. Afterward, there was a debate between the former and a police officer who had been on duty at the G20 summit in Hamburg, 2017.²¹ The discussion centered on the topic of violence (goals and legitimization) as well as the processes of getting involved in and leaving the extremist movement. The session was based on the *10 tips for successful contemporary witness talks in schools (10 Tipps für ein erfolgreiches Zeitzeugengespräch an Schulen)*, which was developed for the memorial’s work with contemporary witnesses.²²

Working Group on Right-Wing Extremism and Violence

ARUG is a civil society organization that, inter alia, provides exit counseling for right-wing extremists. According to its description, it is the only institution interviewed that did not

²¹ There was severe rioting at this summit. For further information see, e.g., <https://www.dw.com/en/g20-violence-in-hamburg-german-leaders-outraged/a-39620193> [02/09/2021].

²² These tips include the preparation of the content (e.g., contextual knowledge, biography of the person and creation of questions), the desired atmosphere as well as the behavior during and after the talk. https://www.ddr-zeitzeuge.de/fileadmin/zeitzeugen/downloads/10_Tipps_fuer_ein_erfolgreiches_Zeitzeugengespraech.pdf [02/24/2021].

conduct PVE with formers for children and juveniles.²³ As stated by the interviewee, the autobiography *Timo F. Neonazi* was the only educational contribution to schools on this topic. Notwithstanding this, former right-wing extremists had been occupied in multiplier events in the past, mainly in university or training seminars, such as those for future teachers, educators, social pedagogues and others who “will have to be able to decipher biographies in the future.” Generally, workshops with formers related to ARUG were always accompanied and moderated by specialized staff. In this way, the contents could have been guided by impulses and through directing questions. The interview partner stressed the importance of adapting both moderation and questions for a given audience.

At the time of the interview, the introduction of quality standards for formers in education for civil society organizations in the BAG was being sought for the first time. As the interviewee stated that the involvement of individual formers in P/CVE led to this, the question regarding the qualifications needed arose: “Where does the qualification come from other than from looking back on one’s own biography?” Furthermore, there was a “fundamental skepticism” among many actors who questioned the credibility of unaccompanied disengagement/deradicalization processes in particular. Therefore, the criticism was primarily directed at “these self-appointed,” whose disengagement/deradicalization process was not accompanied by an exit program.

Former Extremists in (school) PVE

In this section, the procedure and anticipated impacts of involving former extremists in (school) PVE are addressed. To avoid advertising or discrediting the institutions and/or their work, the following sections are presented without identification.²⁴

²³ Contradictory information was found in the course of our research: <https://www.landeskirche-hannovers.de/evlka-de/presse-und-medien/nachrichten/2010/08/29-14446> [02/09/2021]; <https://www.elm-mission.net/ueber-uns/presse-und-information/2010/projekttag-gegen-rechts.html> [02/09/2021].

²⁴ The numbering of the interviewees does not correspond to the previous order of the institutions in section “background information.”

Procedure

How is Funding implemented?

The funding of the interventions was handled in different ways by the four institutions. In one of them, the formers were completely unpaid. In another, the formers were generally not paid, but their travel costs were covered. In exceptional cases, individual organizers paid a “hundred bucks” as an expense allowance, which was acceptable “if the [former] was on the road for a day.” (Int. 1). Still, this was not an “incentive to make an industry out of it.” (Int. 1). The activities on behalf of the other two institutions were always conducted for a fee payable by the organizer. Despite this commonality, there were also different points of view that needed to be considered, such as with regard to lecture costs.

Since they were prohibited from carrying out educational work, one institution had “specially founded an agency [...], so to speak, as a booking agency.” (Int. 2). Various modules can be booked here, including lectures by formers. They received a fee for each event, with part of the income generated in this way going to the booking agency, which covered its running costs. The interviewee stated, “the [formers] don’t get” the whole sum (Int. 2). The prices were usually € 400 plus the VAT. A talk was always calculated as a daily rate, as “even if it only lasts one and a half hours, people have to travel somewhere for a day.” (Int. 2). Depending on the location, charges for the fare and possibly an overnight stay would have to be added, such that even € 600 would have to be paid sometimes. However, prices were variable. Interviewee 2 remarked: “This is a free market. [...] We live in capitalism and the laws of the market apply here.” If an intervention was booked by a company making a higher offer, it would not be rejected. If, for instance, interested organizations or schools were dependent on financial support, the institution would help raise funds:

Int. 2: “Some have no money, they always come and say ‘we would like to do this, but we have no money.’ We always say to the schools, ‘take care of the money, make

applications.’ We have a leaflet, and they are also advised on the phone where they can go.”

Similarly, organizers booking at another institution had to pay a fee. For a workshop, € 50 per hour would be charged for the main speaker, and it would be ensured that the accompanying former is not “lifted too high.” (Int. 3). He/she should be seen as a co-lecturer with a lower fee. At lectures with a low budget, the fee was about € 30–35 per hour, such that three hours were remunerated with an expense allowance of about € 100. Nevertheless, if a former conducted a lecture unaccompanied, the expense allowance had to be adjusted: “He is then effectively considered a specialist and can demand these € 50.” (Int. 3). Likewise, incidental accommodation costs should be reimbursed.

According to the above information, fees or expense allowances are variable. Interviewee 2 mentioned compensation for the loss of earnings as a reason for the comparatively high expense allowances: “Some of the people have to take a leave; they have a loss of earnings. It’s not like they can do it all so casually.” However, he/she stated that formers could not depend solely on the lectures to make a living. Interviewee 3 spoke out in favor of an “expense allowance and nothing more.” He/she alleged that another organization had at times employed “professional formers.” Divergent perceptions of the former extremists’ work resulted in different payment levels: while the other party saw the formers as “professionals” who had to be “properly paid,” they themselves believed that “no gigantic work” was being done and only “a small part of democracy training” was being provided (Int. 3). This difference in perception was confirmed during the interviews, as Interviewee 2 justified the higher prices by stating that “the performance of the [former extremists] should be remunerated. [...] The [participants] want to see something, and they get something.”

In contrast, the institution with lower fees was gearing everything “a bit to the minimum” in order to “stay cheap.” (Int. 3). Interview partner 1 criticized the “enormous amount of money that flows.” Additionally, he/she disapproved of what he/she saw as opaque contracts and contractual conditions between formers and the employing institution. In his/her

opinion, this was a grey area, since disengagement/deradicalization programs financed by public funds received income from “placement fees,” which were handled by another “agency that organizes this [these events/workshops] for [the institution].”

What about the Former Extremists?

How are Formers selected?

In order to be integrated into (school) PVE, former extremists had to fulfill different requirements depending on the institution. In principle, the interview partners agreed that not every former was suitable for this work. However, the selection criteria differed considerably in some cases. Their views varied with regard to the disengagement/deradicalization process and its credibility as a basis for working in PVE.

According to Interviewee 1, only formers whose disengagement/deradicalization process had been professionally accompanied may participate in school PVE. Members who had left an extremist movement on their own would, at best, no longer be observed by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, would not show any criminal behavior, and would not maintain contact with the milieu. Nonetheless, the self-reflection with regard to the ideological beliefs at the time and the (criminal) acts committed was doubtful: “Who voluntarily faces up to this in such a reflective way that they say: ‘I have to face what drove me at the time [...]. I have to face up to that?’ Hardly ever happens.” (Int. 1). In the absence of such an intense confrontation with one’s past, the question arose as to how sustainable disengagement/deradicalization without an “outside connection” could be (Int. 1). Consequently, in the case of an unaccompanied disengagement/deradicalization process, it was not advisable to involve the person in school PVE.

At another institution, the credibility of disengagement/deradicalization was examined in numerous discussions, addressing the reasons for engagement and disengagement/deradicalization. In doing so, Interviewee 4 relied on his/her own assessment: “We wouldn’t put a difficult person in there if we didn’t have a good feeling or [if we] get the

feeling [that] ‘this is going to backfire’ or something. [...] If I didn’t have the feeling that [he/she] had mentally detached himself from it 100 percent, then I wouldn’t let [him/her] loose on young people.” A clear and negative attitude toward the milieu would convey a person’s deradicalization. Further criteria for a successful disengagement/deradicalization process were “simply a question of defining what one understands as detaching oneself.” (Int. 4). Interviewee 4 stated that criticism of protagonists was not uncommon, especially from political opponents: “Some refuse to concede that these people have made their [disengagement/deradicalization] but were still spilling their poison on the students, so to speak.” One former extremist involved in the institutions’ PVE, for example, would not appear in public because of the following reason:

Int. 4: “He/she is still involved in the movement, because they are acquaintances of [his/her] [...]. I think they’re just [his/her] friends [...] independent of political attitudes. [...]. From the point of view [of contact termination], [he/she] didn’t leave [the extremist community], that’s true.”

Correspondingly, Interviewee 3 did not consider a fully completed disengagement/deradicalization process as a prerequisite for school PVE. This was attributed to the variety of formers: while some were deeply traumatized and needed to rest, others felt “such a deep need” to go out in public and simply had this “exhibitionism in their blood.” Since it sometimes even helped them come to terms with their own experience, some people appeared in public at the beginning of their exit process. This could be a part of the exit work, although it was occasionally criticized. Interviewee 3 remarked: “Now, many say, ‘well, in the process, in the initial process, you can’t go out in public with them.’ Then, I say, ‘Man, don’t you understand? Everyone is different!’” Additionally, interview partner 3 stated that formers tended to be very “controversial” sometimes, such that one had to “fight” to be able to conduct talks with them.

Through this experience, Interviewee 3 knew which formers were suitable for P/CVE. Their charisma, demeanor, and bearing had to be taken into account: “They need to have a certain standard.” Although the formers usually still had “something NS-like,” this could not be changed. One had to be careful that they did not “go too far over the top.” (Int. 3). In addition to general suitability, a target group-specific selection was important, as every former “acts completely different in events.” (Int. 3). The selection of the active formers for a certain talk was, therefore, determined by the audience. “Very plain” formers were used in classes for students with special needs because “that works” (Int. 3). Moreover, the period of activity was an individual matter: while some formers carried out many talks, others “withdrew” after a short time.

Interview partner 2 did not refer to the role of disengagement/deradicalization. However, the interviewee mentioned that certain preconditions, in general, needed to be fulfilled by the formers to be considered for a public appearance. For example, only former extremists who had the inclination to communicate were suitable: “We have to say something, we have to explain ourselves, we have to tell the other members that we were wrong.” This motivation had to “come from within” and they needed to “want to share some kind of narrative.” (Int. 2). If one had the impression that this was the case, formers were directly approached for participation. However, the former should not be “forced” into P/CVE (Int. 2). According to Interviewee 2, it was important for the person to have a “noticeable suitability for counter-narratives.” This depended on “what standing [...], what negative significance” he/she had for the extremist environment. Only if milieu members took him/her seriously would they allow themselves to be addressed by him/her. Likewise, the ability to deal with any threatening situations provoked by the extremist community required character traits such as resilience and stress resistance. As Interviewee 2 remarked, “they have to develop certain inner reflection skills, endure hardship, be resilient to certain things.” He/she stated that former leaders often possessed these qualities. Empathy was an important characteristic of formers active in the public. Thus, people with personality disorders were unfit. Therefore, it was not possible to select suitable formers based on formal criteria alone.

Rather, one needed to “try to empathize with the personality” and take mindset, reaction patterns, and cognitive abilities into consideration (Int. 2).

For school PVE, further requirements should be met in addition to the criteria mentioned for public activities in general. Hence, it was imperative that the formers be able to give a “structured speech [...] [and] exert a certain charismatic effect on the audience.” (Int. 2). Similar to actors, they needed to have a certain “power of illumination.” (Int. 2). This ability was often present in former leaders. In the end, the “personality and insightfulness” determined the contents of the talk (Int. 2). Additionally, the former was selected based on the location, danger analysis (“Could something happen there because the location is too close?” [Int. 2]), and target audiences (appropriate selection of the former for recipients). Accordingly, except for one institution, the selection of formers for school PVE was made based on defined criteria to a lesser extent; rather, the selection was based on the assessments and experiences of the individual.

Are Formers being prepared, educated or trained?

The question of preparing the former extremists involved in (school) PVE, such as through education and training, received negative responses from two interviewees. In contrast, the representatives of the other two institutions were in favor of implementing such measures. In one case, this was achieved by “mentoring” through an experienced former during the first lectures by providing instructions (Int. 3). However, the institutions’ employees were not included in the training. Interviewee 3 remarked: “I didn’t prepare him, nothing. [...] And that’s what works best.” Initial “technical” mistakes were worked on “very hard.” (Int. 3). According to interview partner 3, it was important that formers receive “a bit of methodological-didactic [...] knowledge.” Interviewee 1 noted that professional qualifications on the topic of democracy education were necessary for an involvement in P/CVE, stating: “If [he/she] has these professional qualifications and this background, then let [him/her] do it.”

Anticipated Impacts

Are there specific Success Criteria?

Overall, the interviewees named homogeneous criteria that would have to be fulfilled for a successful intervention. The focus was on accompaniment, preparation, and follow-up.

Is Accompaniment necessary?

Three institutions considered it essential that the formers were joined by specialized staff. According to interview partner 4, pedagogical support was crucial for contextualizing the lecture. This could not be achieved by teachers, as “often, even teachers know nothing about [extremism].” Congruently, Interviewee 1 saw accompaniment as a prerequisite for a successful lecture. Instead of pedagogical support, however, they advocated the participation of a professional exit worker. On the one hand, this worker could assess the effect of such a talk on the former, and on the other hand, he/she would be responsible for ensuring that the former directed his/her own self-reflection. Since the former extremist grasped the reactions of the audience during the lecture, it was a “communication process” between him/her and the audience (Int. 1). The students’ interest was concentrated on “action and violence” due to their media consumption, conceivably leading the formers to conclude, they had “the highest possible attention” when they talked about such matters (Int. 1). Therefore, the exit worker had to ensure that the former extremist avoided adapting his/her lecture accordingly. Otherwise, at subsequent talks, the former would primarily report on acts of violence that had been committed instead of converging “reflection,” which would not interest the students “because they would have to switch on their brains.” (Int. 1). Similarly, the accompaniment of the former by trained staff was an integral part of the lectures at the third institution. While the two institutions described above emphasized either contextualization or the necessity of a present professional exit worker, the third institution took both aspects into account.

Is Preparation and Follow-up needed?

Three interviewees stated that the preparation of the contents was an indispensable prerequisite for a successful lecture. To ensure that the audience approaches the topic independently, one institution asked the students to think of questions for the former beforehand. Interview partner 2 favored preparing lessons on history or another subject that fit the topic. Correspondingly, he/she recommended talking about the topic as well as the former and formulating questions. The teachers should not assume that “the former will come, tell [the students] some stuff and then everything will be fine, we’ve checked it off and everything is done.” (Int. 2). A decent preparation made it possible to set a “communication impulse [...]. You can’t expect anything more.” (Int. 2).

Additionally, Interviewee 1 stressed the importance of introduction and preparation. He/she stated that schools would often prepare only the organizational aspects. The lectures did not appear very effortful, which was “of course relatively tempting.” Nevertheless, the consequence of this approach was that the “show character” predominated. An “aha-effect” on the students’ part could only be elicited if, for example, biographies, the extremist milieu and the acceptance of violence within it had been dealt with beforehand. The question that arose was the following: “Is preparation more than just providing a projector?” (Int. 1). Schools had the responsibility to “honestly ask themselves whether they [could] manage this or not.” (Int. 1). The same procedure was applied to the follow-up. According to him/her, “in 80% of the cases, this does not take place at all.” Hence, the talks were not laid out for the long-term processing of the topic.

With respect to preparation and follow-up as success criteria, Interviewee 3 described preparation as less important than follow-up: “It’s not that important that the students are incredibly well prepared.” In some cases, teachers asked for preparation material in advance, which they were provided with, if applicable. However, the focus was on the follow-up, which was paramount “because the teachers need[ed] to talk.” (Int. 3). Follow-up would always take place with all participants immediately after the intervention. These conversations, which sometimes lasted an hour and a half, were very important: “Some of the

students are like grapes around the former, [...] [he/she] is the best.” (Int. 3). In the aftermath, the former could be reached via Facebook, where occasionally, communication was even more honest, as Interviewee 3 mentioned: “By and large, they are encouraged to follow up via Facebook if they want to.” (Int. 3). Moreover, teachers were often very interested in the aftermath: first, regarding an assessment of the students’ behavior, and second, concerning information about the extremist milieu. In addition, the institution provided them with follow-up materials for class.

Who is the Target Group?

What are the supposed Effects on Students?

Regarding the effects of the lectures on students as the target group, different topics were addressed in the interviews: on the one hand, the positive and negative reactions of the audience, and on the other hand, the intended impact.

Are all Students the Target Group?

Positive reactions from students were highlighted, particularly by the representatives of two institutions. As Interviewee 4 described, even less motivated classes were “totally enthusiastic” about the talks, as it was something “very special” for the students to talk to a former extremist and “to be able to ask [him/her] all their questions themselves uncensored, so to speak.” They participated actively, asked questions, and thanked the former afterward. Similarly, interview partner 3 emphasized the students’ positive reactions. It was clear from his/her comments that, among other things, he/she classified the audience’s unspecified emotional experiences as positive results of the workshops. Furthermore, he/she stated that teachers would often send him/her e-mails, reporting the joy of discussion expressed by the students in the aftermath. In principle, the teachers liked the lectures, especially in view of the students’ interest: “There is dead silence and then the colleague says: ‘It was so wonderful to experience my class being so quiet for once.’” However, teachers’ enthusiasm, given these reactions, was critically evaluated by Interviewee 1: “[S]o fascinated and as quiet as a

mouse,' these are certain terms that come up again and again; teachers are very satisfied when an auditorium is as quiet as a mouse for two hours and listens to this person." Nonetheless, the question was what caused this silence: "Gaining knowledge," "zoo effect," or "contact with the horror?" (Int. 1).

Moreover, some interview partners mentioned the (possible) negative reactions of the audience. For instance, Interviewee 2 reported a negative experience: During a former's lecture, the realistic description of violent acts made a girl in the audience cry. Consequently, formers in (school) PVE, in general, were put up for discussion: "That's just clear, you have that debate right away." However, after some time, it dissolved again. Since then, more attention has been paid to avoid such reactions. In other projects, formers with a "soft attitude toward the Holocaust" attracted negative attention (Int. 2). According to him/her, such incidents had to be dealt with individually. Interviewee 4 stated that he/she had not experienced any negative emotional reactions from the audience. These were not caused by the lectures, as they would not center on violent acts committed. In general, the utilization of formers, just as the involvement of victims, was rather controversial: "There are critics saying, 'that must not be' and others who think it's totally fine." For unexplained reasons, interview partner 4 thought that there was less danger of the audience being overwhelmed by "a former than by a victim." In principle, however, this depended on the individual.

Additionally, Interviewee 4 expected that "a real person" telling his/her story would be "much more exciting than if [...] [the educators] narrate[d] something or show[ed] a film." Correspondingly, he/she assumed that the background of engagement and disengagement/deradicalization processes were of particular interest to young people such "that they [could] ask about it." At best, the interactive communication ensured that the young people could "in the sense of a transfer or abstraction perhaps establish parallels to their own life." (Int. 4). The talks aimed to raise awareness among students and warn them of the dangers of extremist milieus "without moralistic finger-pointing." (Int. 4). The former extremist was supposed to initiate reflection from the audience. Conversely, another institution aimed at encouraging students to discuss and reflect on the topic. Moreover,

interview partner 1 criticized the lack of knowledge on the long-term effects of such school interventions. He/she saw the purpose of these lectures in conveying and spreading a message. Consequently, for him/her, the question arose as to what “stuck” with the students a few weeks after the event. He/she assumed that this would mainly be the action-packed contents, which were more interesting for the students compared to the former’s retrospective assessments of his/her actions. Ultimately, the message conveyed was interpreted individually by each student. However, at best, the teachers reported that the talks had been “well-received.” (Int. 1).

Or is the Focus on Students with a (supposed) Affinity?

In addition to the primary preventive effects, three interview partners made statements regarding possible secondary preventive effects of the measures. The representatives of two institutions stated that schools sometimes asked for lectures on an ad hoc basis. Interviewee 2 was critical in this regard: “Those are always such impulses from schools, what they want is a miracle cure, [...] and that’s nonsense, right?” Nevertheless, the talks could be a way to get in touch with people who were already active in an extremist environment but had doubts. This usually happened afterward, through individual conversations with them, which were not rare. If the lecture had moved them, they sought this exchange, which had already led to more lasting contacts and distancing in some cases. Similarly, Interviewee 3 stated that it was not uncommon to be contacted due to an incident. Despite this, he/she did not appear to be aiming to influence milieu members. Instead, he/she appreciated if these specific students participated in the lecture at all. Still, several affiliated people among the students would partly take the stand: “We’re not even participating here.” He/she compared this to “passive resistance.” Under these circumstances, emotional experiences on the part of students were an exception. In the follow-up communication offered, some students with an affinity to an extremist movement approached the formers, but long-term communication was rare. Although the third institution had not been approached due to concrete incidents, they had encountered young people with an affinity in school classes: “That’s not that rare.” (Int. 4). These students

had different perceptions that had to be specially directed. If this was successful, an “aha effect” could occur. According to Interviewee 4, with younger students, for example, the symbolic power of music, id est, the typical stimuli of extremist milieus, initially had an effect; however, they did not understand “what it [was] all about.” Only after a certain time would young people reflect on the contents and methods and realize that being part of the extremist milieu was not only about “fun and games.” (Int. 4).

Supposed Effects on the Former Extremists – Or: Are Formers the main Target Group?

In this section, the effects of the talks on the former extremists are considered in general and are not limited to the school context. Three interview partners described such activities as conducive to leaving extremist milieus. According to Interviewee 4, in the course of their “process of breaking away from the extremist movement [...], they [felt] the need [...] to exchange ideas.” To satisfy this need, formers approached the institution and stated that they “would like to work with [the institution] more often [...].” In this context, feelings of guilt were a motivator: they tried to “make amends” for their past behavior (Int. 4). Interviewee 3 described the talks as a “part of social work. They need it and it speeds up the [disengagement/deradicalization process], because the process actually takes an awfully long time. [...] Sometimes, they even have to go out in public”; this helped them cope with their experiences. In doing so, they put themselves in danger because “as soon as they go out in public, they get a real beating [from the milieu].” (Int. 3). Additionally, interview partner 2 mentioned threats from within as possible negative consequences of public appearances.

Interviewee 1 stressed the importance of self-reflection and the presence of a responsible exit worker. The latter had the “right” as well as the duty to identify what the former “consciously, unconsciously” did not address during the lecture: “That is also a legitimate question. What does the former not cover in [his/her] talk?” Only an exit worker with knowledge of the former’s past could specifically follow up on this and refer to contents that were not discussed along with unanswered questions from the audience. Through this strategy, the identification of biographical contents that had not been dealt with thus far,

“where perhaps this person [did] not look particularly good in the reflection, which one likes to avoid” was possible (Int. 1). Such a follow-up was indispensable. This was the only possible way to assess whether the lecture had “furthered” the former extremist. According to Interviewee 1, being involved in P/CVE partly hindered integration into the labor market and the goal of achieving “a normal biography,” despite the possibly positive influence of the talks on the disengagement/deradicalization process. For the individual, this bore the risk of “being labeled as a former extremist for the rest of their life and wanting to earn money through this label.” (Int. 1). If the former extremist wanted to be active in PVE in the long term, he/she had to undergo professional training.

What about (Impact) Evaluation?

Representatives of three institutions provided information on the evaluations of their school-based PVE. One interview partner referred to the participant feedback requested by the institution itself and the other to the monitoring conducted by external organizations. The third interviewee mentioned both approaches.

From Interviewee 3’s point of view, an external evaluation should be seen as a “sacred cow” that every institution working with formers in P/CVE should carry out as soon as possible. “I always attach great importance to the fact that an expert committee really, but a real expert committee, really seriously examined the thing over a long period of time. Otherwise, you can’t evaluate it.” In order to be able to have all components of the project reviewed, three quarters of a year were “just about” sufficient as an observation period. If the results are positive, one was “on the safe side.” Interviewee 3 continued: “And when you’re through, I won’t discuss this anymore.” Interviewee 1 doubted that external evaluation had this immunizing effect regarding criticism. He/she personally was open to the results of impact studies (“It works, or it doesn’t work in the context, or it works under such and such conditions”), but in his/her opinion, other actors would not be dissuaded from their beliefs even in the light of scientific findings: “Nevertheless, many [disengagement/deradicalization programs] will stick to their creeds without there being a scientific basis for it.” (Int. 1).

A self-evaluation of the former assignments on the basis of students' and/or teachers' opinions was carried out by two institutions. Interviewee 3 placed great importance on having students fill out the evaluation forms which corresponded to their class or learning level and were checked for "any flaws" or "any problems." Furthermore, feedback was sought from teachers. Another institution evaluated the lectures through written reports: "[T]here are some pictures in there and some numbers." (Int. 4). By collecting feedback and suggestions from students and teachers, PVE workshops have been continuously developed.

Fundamental doubts regarding the sustainability of the effect of school PVE involving formers were expressed by Interviewee 1, criticizing that teachers often associated workshops with an expectation of "enlightenment" or deterrence. These unfounded assumptions and a fascination on the students' part suggested effects of PVE whose sustainability had not been proven so far. According to Interviewee 1, prevention was "an investment in the long term." Within the framework of a "prevention culture," it was conceivable to conduct such lectures (Int. 1) under certain conditions, along with other measures.

Former Extremists in Exit Work

The preceding section illustrates that PVE involving former extremists was handled and assessed heterogeneously. Furthermore, utilizing formers for exit work was a controversial topic. Two interviewees stated that the public appearances of formers were beneficial for preventive purposes. At one institution, despite the criticism, this was an "important part of the concept" in order to reach the clients and act as a contact point for people willing to leave the extremist milieu (Int. 2). The second institution's representative emphasized the social perspective:

Int. 3: "We shouldn't really be discussing them at all, because they go out in public, do press stuff; that's the best thing, that's the sharpest weapon we have. We'd be stupid not to use the formers in public."

Interviewee 1 was critical of former extremists becoming involved in exit work. If formers were active as lecturers in PVE and exit work at the same time, they would require a “change of roles [...]; [he/she thinks] that is fatal.” Moreover, he/she considered it “very difficult and hardly feasible” for formers to act as intermediaries between people willing to leave and an exit program. This activity contradicted the prerequisite of breaking off contacts with the extremist milieu. According to Interviewee 1, the public appearances of formers, for example, through their own website where they “sell themselves, so to speak,” or similar activities should “not be used as a strategic measure,” even under the premise of getting to generate more formers: “The price would frankly be too high for me.” This approach would counteract the setting of exit work and the rules that apply in this context:

Int. 1: “The rules are anonymity [and] confidentiality agreement for every story. And if I encourage someone and say, ‘Present yourself on the internet,’ etc., then I don’t need to take a confidentiality agreement with me to appointments or attach importance to the man not becoming a story.”

As Interviewee 1 stated, there was a divergence in perception between the media public, which supported the marketing of the formers with positive reporting (“Ah, that’s someone you come into contact with so rarely and report about it and rather report about the glowing eyes of the students”), and the professional public. Considering this “industry” and in light of the “media-friendly career[s]” of the formers, the “question of ethical handling of other people’s biographies” arose. However, this issue has hardly been brought to the public’s attention. It could be dangerous for exit workers to act as a “marketer of such a biography [...], as a marketing consultant” and, thereby, making decisions based on economic criteria: “Your biography, for example, that could make us a lot of money.” In his/her opinion, this would get in the way of the actual goal of supporting the former in integrating with society. If a former extremist pursues this work and earns money from it, he/she is “always determine[d]

as a former.” Interviewee 1 agreed with the representatives of two other institutions who also stated that one could not be a former all their life (Int. 3/4).

Discussion

The interviews provided relevant information and significant findings regarding the utilization of formers in (school) PVE in Germany. Furthermore, our innovative perspective on the topic sheds some light on the state of professionalization in the German context with its long tradition. However, one needs to keep the limitations in mind when discussing the results.

The findings of the analysis pointed out the divergences between the individual actors engaged in the field with regard to several essential aspects. This became clear, for instance, in relation to the inconsistent ideas about preparation, accompaniment, and follow-up. Given the challenges of biography-based work, as well as the specifics of formers’ narratives, the preparation, accompaniment, and follow-up of the school talks undoubtedly are paramount (cf. Mattsson & Johansson, 2018; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, in preparation). However, not all institutes regarded it as significant. Another issue was the involvement of former extremists in exit work—a regular practice that often has positive connotations (e.g., Briggs & Feve, 2013, pp. 24 et seq.). However, Koehler argues that it cannot meet the commonly held assumptions (2020).

Furthermore, the difference in selection criteria regarding formers involved in school PVE are particularly critical. The selection is not primarily based on fixed criteria, but rather on the assessment of the institution or persons. Consequently, decisions are primarily based on one’s own feelings toward a certain former. Even so, a successfully completed disengagement/deradicalization process was not consistently regarded as obligatory for an assignment in PVE; people still processing their disengagement/deradicalization or those who maintained contacts with an extremist environment were also engaged in PVE-E. This finding aligns with the results of other parts of our research project, pointing to the utilization of formers regardless of a successfully completed disengagement/deradicalization process

(Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, 2021). Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that the formers—who had often been in leadership positions—should possess a certain charisma and oratorical skills. The former leadership role, which the media often associates with positive connotations, should be reconsidered in light of the weight of the social status of the observed for social learning (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021). In view of these selection criteria, one needs to question the practice of sending formers to their first talks unaccompanied and/or involving them unprepared, based on the perception that it is the best approach. Additionally, some of the criteria mentioned were not verifiable by exit workers. Specifically, the presence of a personality disorder must be considered in this context. However, it might be necessary to evaluate such presence prior to involving formers in P/CVE. In short, one could question the fitness of persons with certain personality accentuations, at least in the context of PVE-E (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, 2021).

Regarding the anticipated impacts of these (school) interventions, some interviewees held irreconcilable points of view. On the one hand, speculations about the effects were formulated as easily assessable facts and in the sense of a feasibility gesture (cf. Oeftering, 2013, p. 62); on the other hand, the lack of knowledge about the effects of PVE-E involving formers was partially lamented. Although the interview partners were aware of the research gaps, some rejected research per se. Additionally, deficits in scientific monitoring and (impact) evaluations were apparent. Although three interviewees mentioned some kind of evaluative assessment, they hardly allowed reliable conclusions to be drawn with respect to needs for improvement and effects. Moreover, there is only one published evaluation report available on one of the three institutions working with formers in schools.²⁵ However, this report (Lobermeier, 2014) has some shortcomings (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, in preparation).

Likewise, the interview partners focused on different aspects with regard to anticipated impacts. In some cases, the primary prevention goal appeared to play a subordinate role

²⁵ With regard to an evaluation of the work with former extremists in schools by EXIT-Germany, there is only a one-page feedback sheet on the satisfaction (ticking off pictures) of pupils on a project day, of which the former's talk was one of seven models ("2013 Evaluation eines Aussteigervortrages," <https://www.exit-deutschland.de/exit/?c=Evaluation> [06/04/2021]).

compared to addressing members of extremist milieus. In other cases, primary and secondary prevention goals were mixed, and secondary prevention aspects were mentioned in response to questions pertaining to primary prevention mechanisms. This is remarkable, since these goals need to be addressed differently (cf. Walsh & Gansewig, forthcoming). Well-meaning initiatives aimed at students with a (supposed) affinity might fuel their radicalization process (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020a). Nevertheless, some interviewees had solely positive perceptions regarding the involvement of formers in the school workshops. Moreover, it was particularly noticeable that questions pertaining to the effects of these talks predominantly focused on the former extremists, whereas the effects on the students as the main target group appeared to have secondary importance, if one takes the frequency and intensity of mentions as the basis for the subjectively attributed value. This focus on the benefits of P/CVEs for formers themselves, and its disadvantages are discussed in the literature (cf. Mattsson & Johansson, 2020b; Gansewig & Walsh, 2021). One of the challenges in this respect could be that certain exit workers and formers themselves assess the utilization of P/CVE as beneficial for the deradicalization/disengagement process (cf. van den Berg, 2017, pp. 50; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 148 et seq.). This one-sided line of argument can also be found in some academic considerations (e.g., Bjørgo, 1997, p. 227 et seq.; Zick & Böckler, 2015, p. 14).

The concentration on the former extremists is reflected in the quality standards for their involvement in educational work published by civil society organizations in 2018—although they are approved institutes of children and youth welfare²⁶ (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 103 et seq.). The same one-sided concentration can be stated for EXIT-Germany's standards first published in June 2021 (Krause et al., 2021). Since these activities are mostly linked to disengagement/deradicalization programs, this is probably due to certain existing conditions: the focus of exit work lies on its clients, not on the actual target group of PVE-E—the students. Of course, the same applies to guidelines for involving formers in CVE and exit work (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 103 et seq.). In the authors' view, involving

²⁶ <https://www.bag-ausstieg.de/mitglieder/> [06/11/2021].

teaching staff in the conception and implementation of PVE-E, should be mandatory (*ibid.*, p. 424). On the issue of quality standards, conclusions can be drawn regarding state actors in the field, whose activities are characterized by a high degree of opacity. Thus, one state actor engaged in the field since the early 2000s states that their activities had all the while been principally based on the standards published in 2018 by a civil society organization (Pfeiffer & Schirmer, 2020; cf. Nina NRW, n.d.).

From our point of view, the analysis reiterates the need for improvement within the German context, thereby emphasizing the results of the overall research project (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020). In this context, and in light of the fact that, to date, no scientific study has reliably concluded that these interventions have any significant extremism- or crime-preventing effects on students, we see no reason for euphemisms and one-sided promotions (both nationally and internationally) as practiced by some (cf. Wagner, 2020; Pfeiffer & Schirmer, 2020; Parker & Lindekilde, 2020; Scrivens et al., 2020b; Foerch Saab, 2020)²⁷.

As we took a new approach to this topic, we believe it to be appropriate to address an ethical concern regarding the practice: A publicly funded institution establishing a booking agency and creating a business out of conducting P/CVE—also mainly publicly funded—thereby referring to the free market and simultaneously advertising this work on the institute’s website is questionable. In our opinion, these practices need to be debated and reviewed.

Conclusion and Outlook

This article aims to shed light on the practice of school-based PVE in Germany with/by former extremists, as well as the degree of professionalization in the field. Since the global adoption of this format has been increasing over the last few years, some stakeholders wanting to implement it in their countries might turn to Germany and its twenty-year experience. However, this long tradition might not mean that Germany has already

²⁷ See also, e.g., <https://journal-exit.de/die-botschaft/> [05/07/2021]; <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/speaker> [05/07/2021].

established best practices. In summary, the analysis pointed to the deficits of PVE involving former extremists in German schools, which aligned with the results of the overall research project, thereby highlighting critical aspects in the practice (e.g., Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, 2021). The findings revealed, for example, an undifferentiated consideration of prevention levels, divergent ideas regarding adequate preparation and follow-up, minimal focus on the students as the main target group of these prevention measures, and the possibility of non-intended effects. Certain aspects of the selection of persons, as well as the inadequacy of preparation and/or training, seemed particularly critical. On the one hand, one can hardly demand professional training for former extremists in this area, considering the dilemma posed by such training as outlined by Koehler (2020). On the other hand, this should not result in unprepared involvement of formers in P/CVE. Even if the question of how to train and prepare formers for P/CVE was to be answered, one still had to acknowledge that training courses were hardly based on the current state of scientific knowledge (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). These aspects need to be addressed in order to answer the question raised at the beginning: How should and could accurate professionalization in this context be assessed?

As the interviews revealed, some former extremists active in PVE had not yet progressed far in their disengagement/deradicalization process and/or were unprepared for the (school) workshops. It may be concluded that these interventions might have less critical content if the former extremists were at least, for example, adequately prepared and had successfully completed their exit process. Consequently, we argue that it is necessary to fundamentally re-evaluate both the selection criteria of formers for P/CVE as well as their preparation for these formats. Given the numerous critical aspects found in the overall study, the question arises regarding the learning objectives of these talks. Thus, questions must be asked on whether and how exactly a preventive effect on students shall or can be achieved under these conditions and whether all providers active in this field carry out these measures for preventive purposes or if other aspects are prioritized (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, 2021). After all, in the worst case, such interventions dissipate potential for effective prevention and education.

Hence, it is fair to conclude that the practice of involving former extremists in (school-based) prevention and education, as witnessed in Germany, demands an improvement in professionalization despite an experience of over 20 years. Currently, the discourse on professionalization centers on the former extremists themselves. The results of our analysis highlight the necessity of focusing on the organizations behind these activities as well, since they are responsible for ensuring the professionalization. As the analysis was limited to interviews with representatives of civil society organizations and as sound public information about these (school) P/CVE offers is generally rare, it cannot paint a complete picture. Given that some former extremists are independently organized, the need for professionalization is supposedly even higher. Certainly, the professionalization of these formers is especially challenging. This puts specific responsibility on funders and schools.

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