

Antje Gansewig & Maria Walsh. *Biographiebasierte Maßnahmen in der schulischen Präventions- und Bildungsarbeit. Eine empirische Betrachtung des Einsatzes von Aussteigern aus extremistischen Szenen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ehemaliger Rechtsextremer* [*Biography-based measures within preventive and educational work in schools. An empirical observation of the utilization of 'formers' from extremist milieus, with a special focus on former right-wing extremists*]. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2020 (1st ed.; 473 pp.) EUR 98,00. ISBN: 978-3-8487-6317-7. DOI: 10.5771/9783748904175

Reviewed by Nina Käsehage

Autobiographical narratives by former practitioners have for a long time been used in schools as a teaching device in various fields, e.g. to prevent young people from becoming addicted to illicit drugs. This German study examines the involvement of former right-wing extremists to prevent radicalization among school-going teenagers. It is widely assumed that the credibility of biographical narratives underpinned by real life experiences offers an effective method of knowledge transfer to young minds. However, this assumption has rarely been tested. This book offers to fill this gap.

The general objective of the study was to gain, on the one hand, an overview of all German (school) prevention activities with, or from, 'formers' and, on the other hand, a critical assessment of those activities. It is based on a broad range of postal surveys, media analyses and interviews with de-radicalisation workers from NGO's as well as teachers and pupils to evaluate the impact of interventions by 'formers'. It includes an in-depth examination and evaluation of a primary prevention school measure by a former right-wing extremist and its effects on the audience in the classroom.

Based on a survey of the existing literature on the subject, the authors deplore the absence of critical analyses regarding the use of formers. Following their own evaluation, they became rather skeptical about the wisdom of involving former right-wing extremists in high school prevention work. They found that some of the 'formers' had not left extremist groups voluntarily but were kicked out while others offered their services for classroom interventions mainly for financial reasons and came to regard it as a new career path (the length of time many 'formers' engaged in such 'prevention work' could last up to twelve years!).

The authors identified a variety of both intended and unintended effects on the pupils, ranging from individual sympathy for 'formers' due to their authenticity to the danger of a trivialization of violence. One of the commendable aspects of this study is the focus on the needs of the pupils themselves. Less commendable is the absence of references for articles and reports in the sections based on media analyses. The subtitle of the book is slightly misleading as other extremists than those on the political right are hardly discussed. Given the almost exclusive focus on right-wing 'formers', it is not clear whether and to which extent the study's findings can also be applied to the role of former Islamist extremists in school-based prevention work. Yet despite such minor shortcomings, this is a solid analysis.

Antje Gansewig is a sociologist and Maria Walsh a psychologist by training. Both were, at the time of writing this book, associated with the German National Center for Crime Prevention in Bonn.

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