
Book Review: ‘Intention is not method, belief is not evidence’: Civic Education and Prevention with Former Right-Wing Extremists in German Schools

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Abstract

This article reviews Antje Gansewig’s “‘Intention is not method, belief is not evidence’: Civic Education and Prevention with Former Right-Wing Extremists in German Schools” (2022).

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Introduction

‘Radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’ have become fashionable, but also highly indeterminate concepts in public discourse in the past decades. As noted by Panjwani et al. (2018), ‘we are currently living in an *age of extremisms*; or rather, an age in which extremisms are becoming a commonplace and “mainstreamed” aspect of public life’ (p. 1). This mainstreaming is closely linked with the emergence of societal preventative measures, ubiquitous in many countries (Stephens, 2021), that target extremism and violence. In this context, many countries have developed policies, guidelines, and legislation that address radicalization and violent extremism, and, important for Gansewig’s book, educational systems are often considered a vital institutional piece of P/CVE work (Koehler, 2022b; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020). (I have chosen to use P/CVE, ‘preventing and countering violent extremism’, from among a number of terms describing efforts to curb violent extremism: ‘deradicalization’, ‘counter-radicalization’, “‘EXIT” programs’, and ‘disengagement’.)

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The growing association between education and security governance has resulted in a burgeoning literature (Jerome & Elwick, 2019) and has attracted the attention of scholars from a range of fields and disciplines whose work spans both policy research regarding how education can be used to prevent extremism, as well as critical analysis of the unintended and oftentimes negative consequences of the securitization of education

Although it would be too simple to argue that research on the security-education nexus fits nicely within the ‘orthodox’, or ‘critical’, research paradigm, critical research on how P/CVE securitizes education has only recently been thrust into the limelight (Zembylas, 2020). In her book *‘Intention is not method, belief is not evidence’: Civic education and prevention with former right-wing extremists in German schools*, Antje Gansewig (2022) furthers this important scholarship by discussing current knowledge about interventions against violent extremism in German schools while also addressing key issues and assumptions. More specifically, Dr. Gansewig examines the potential and challenges of involving former right-wing extremists (formers) in interventional efforts, in an evidence-based manner.

Alongside a handful of European countries, Germany pioneered P/CVE work during the 1990s, and EXIT programs involving the participation of right-wing extremists in Germany have existed since the early 2000s (Koehler, 2021). However, the impact and implication of using formers for interventional purposes have arguably not been the centre of systematic inquiry (Gansewig, 2022, p. 79). This observation is indicative of research on P/CVE measures beyond EXIT programs as well (Lewis et al., 2023; Wolfowicz et al., 2022). In fact, despite the recent proliferation of dissertations researching social and educational prevention of extreme forms of violence (Gielen, 2020; Haugstvedt, 2021; Malmros, 2022; Mattsson, 2018; Sjøen, 2020; Stephens, 2021), little work has been done in assessing the effectiveness and implications of these efforts, a lacuna Dr. Gansewig addresses with evidence that illuminates central questions regarding the use of school-based P/CVE efforts.

‘Intention is not method, belief is not evidence’: Civic education and prevention with former right-wing extremists in German schools is based on Dr. Gansewig’s doctoral dissertation. It consists of five sections, beginning with an overview of EXIT programs in Germany and scholarly discussions on civic education, P/CVE efforts, and former right-wing extremists. The book then provides a summary of four studies co-authored with Maria Walsh

and previously published. *Study I* is an impact assessment of school-based interventions with a post-intervention screening (Walsh & Gansewig, 2019), *study II* analyses formers' digital media channels (YouTube videos) (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021a), *study III* is a content analysis of newspaper articles regarding public lectures by formers (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021b), and *study IV* is a synopsis of the empirical literature on the use of formers in school-based interventions (Gansewig & Walsh, 2022). These summaries are followed by an expansive discussion of the use of formers in intervention programs in the German educational system and an analysis of schools as historical, normative, organizational, and socio-cultural institutions. Gansewig pays close attention to the wide range of target audiences and stakeholders including school staff, students, former right-wing extremists, and the organizations that implement P/CVE programs in German schools. Following this discussion, Gansewig briefly presents research limitations (a more thorough discussion of this is available in the four research studies) and suggestions for future research priorities. Lastly, the book is summarized and concluded.

Through a multi-methodological approach, Dr. Gansewig advances our understanding of school-based P/CVE efforts in Germany and the effect of these various interventions. Furthermore, the research provides important insights into the dialectical relationship between the emancipatory and civic functions of education and education's ability to perform P/CVE. Overall, Dr. Gansewig offers compelling and provocative insights into P/CVE research by weaving together empirical insights from the four studies.

Of the many highlights, it is worth noting the combination of experimental data and the systematic examination of empirical literature on the use of formers for interventional purposes (studies I and IV). Arguably, this may allow for generating mid-range theories for evidence-based interventions (see Gansewig, 2022, p. 17, for a discussion on evidence-based interventions in education). Another novel contribution is Gansewig's methodological approach to studying formers' media platforms. By analysing media narratives, visual representation, educational appropriateness, and business models (study II), alongside formers' public lectures about their deradicalization and disengagement (study III), Dr. Gansewig scrutinizes the personal, ideological, and economic motivation of formers to engage in P/CVE efforts. Of particular interest is the finding that some formers fail to distance themselves from extremism or crime (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021a, p. 162). Another

concerning finding is that some formers continue to glorify violence on their media platforms after deradicalization (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021b, p. 12). Altogether, these findings allow for a comparison of normative assumptions and descriptive realities regarding the involvement of formers in German school-based P/CVE efforts, which is a consistent theme in Gansewig's book from the choice of title to the conclusions that she draws.

Research on the security-education nexus all too often portrays education as universal and simplistic, where concepts relating to the securitized domain are treated with more rigor and sophistication than concepts belonging to the educational domain. In contrast, Dr. Gansewig offers a fresh perspective on school-based P/CVE efforts that is firmly embedded in the educational domain. To be clear, violent extremism is a serious issue that affects individuals and societies around the world. At the same time, however, extremism is miniscule in scope when compared to the array of purposes, functions and teaching content in education, which are delivered through a wide range of formal, non-formal, and informal activities. Dr. Gansewig encapsulates this point in a convincing manner, and it relates to what Koehler (2022a) writes in the book's foreword:

Doing PCVE can never be an end to itself but serves very specific purposes, for example to safeguard children, to protect our societies from harm, to create resilience and democratic culture, or to help those who want to leave violence and extremism. (p. X)

For those seeking a nuanced and critical analysis of key assumptions and evidence about educational interventions against violent extremism, Dr. Gansewig offers a persuasive and up-to-date analysis of the impact and implications of the use of formers in P/CVE measures in German schools, relevant for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and students alike. The conclusions offered in this study would have benefitted from a more in-depth discussion of the findings in relation to the two educational concepts *erziehung* (to accept and maintain status quo in society) and *bildung* (subjective emancipation) (Gansewig, 2022, p. 10). After all, educational P/CVE work is undertaken in tension, albeit in various iterations: the educational function of democratic legitimacy versus democratic transformation, educational individualism versus educational collectivism, and cultural conservatism versus cultural radicalism. It would also have been helpful had the book

provided a more thorough discussion of the key concepts ‘radicalization’, ‘violent extremism’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘counterterrorism’. Arguably, the ontological, epistemological, and axiological discussions of these concepts are not only important from a preventive perspective but also integral from a didactical perspective, that is, how school staff help students learn and make sense of the social world. Hopefully, Dr. Gansewig will add to the important discussion she has begun by furthering our empirical and theoretical insights into the contemporary security-education nexus.

Gansewig does a convincing job of challenging myths and assumptions about the use of formers in school-based interventions. As noted by Koehler (2022a) in the book’s foreword, ‘we now have solid evidence through experimental research and sophisticated statistical analyses that workshops with formers in the primary P/CVE field come with many “buts” and “ifs”’ (p. X). In addition to what is mentioned in the previous paragraph, Dr. Gansewig (2022) uses impact assessment to show that school-based interventions do not influence right-wing extremist attitudes and delinquency among students as is expected (p. 97). Moreover, interventions using formers tend to lack theoretical and pedagogical clarity (p. 128), and P/CVE measures sometimes result in negative situations for students (p. 116).

In addition to shedding light on the discrepancy between assumptions and reality, *‘Intention is not method, belief is not evidence’: Civic education and prevention with former right-wing extremists in German schools* situates the study of formers and school-based interventions in the wider educational context, in line with the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice and schools as institutions for preventing a range of antisocial phenomena. To be sure, P/CVE efforts are based on therapeutic strategies initially developed to prevent bullying, gang violence, and drug addiction among children and adolescents (Mattsson, 2018). Such policy focuses extensively on the therapeutic functions of contemporary education (Aly et al., 2014), which, in turn, has provoked critique of the ‘therapeutisation of education’, in that it drives the individualized, vulnerability-oriented, and depoliticized turn in education (Biesta, 2009). In this context, Dr. Gansewig (2022) makes a compelling case to push back against the prevalent assumptions regarding school-based P/CVE efforts in Germany through the sobering conclusion that “there is currently no empirical evidence that the use of formers for interventional purposes helps to achieve these goals” (p. 137).

This book is one of the first attempts to systematically analyze the impact and implications of using formers in school-based P/CVE efforts. In doing so, Dr. Gansewig offers interdisciplinary insights relevant for the fields of education, security studies, terrorism research, criminology, media studies, and evaluation research. However, this book is especially apropos in the educational arena, as it delves into a particular form of P/CVE in the specific socio-cultural and geographical educational context. Far too often scholars talk about education with a capital ‘E’, especially in non-educational fields, as if it had a unitary meaning denoting straightforward processes that cannot be contested. However, you do not need to have a student background (but it helps) to know that the ‘educational process’, from the abstract world of educational ideals and ideology, to formalized policies and curriculums, to enacted classroom didactics, and most importantly, to the embodied student experience, is anything but straightforward (Biesta, 2009; Goodlad, 1979).

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