

Reflections on prevention of violent radicalization processes in the school context: an intercultural and critical approach *

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Abstract

The article discusses the issue of the prevention of violent radicalization processes (Khosrokhavar, 2014) in schools, in the Italian context, focusing on their jihadist-type declination, and it intends to propose an interpretation based on the intercultural approach (Schiavinato & Mantovani 2005; Mantovani, 2008; Schiavinato 2015) to the difference management in public contexts (Rhazzali, 2016). This perspective allows us to move the scientific debate away from the predominantly securitarian and emergency perspective, widely adopted by public policies, that removes from the political agenda the issue of an effective and fair management of cultural and religious plurality in the society and in the public space, by adopting an approach which is defined in the literature as “policed multiculturalism” (Ragazzi, 2015). Moreover, the securitarian discourse is a leading argument of some political parties and, encouraged by the mass media, is still dominant in common sense discourses. The intercultural perspective, on the other hand, proposes a more complex interpretation that includes not only the issue of immigration, but also allows to question the changes affecting society and everyone lives, in relation to the interconnections and exchanges that characterise the current era. It therefore considers personal and individual experience within a web of relationships co-constructed in everyday interactions, that are in turn situated in a wider social and cultural framework, which gives sense and influences them and, at the same time, is signified and influenced by them. The intercultural approach, in this respect, does not renounce taking a position of criticism and questioning of exclusion or

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inferiorisation dynamics, that operate both on interpersonal level and in everyday relationships, and on the broader level of the social processes that frame them.

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Introduction

In the last two decades, violent jihadist radicalism has become one of the central issues on the international and European political agenda. Alongside the policies of contrast and repression and the actions of intelligence and coordination of security agencies, prevention programmes have multiplied. A first application area of such projects is certainly the prison environment, which is considered, together with the web space, one of the most “at risk” environments for proselytism and “recruitment” by movements inspired by a violent radical ideology.

If we focus on the European and Italian context, however, we can note that an increasing investment of resources has been allocated to prevention programmes aimed particularly at young people, both in informal organisations and in schools. These projects can be described in relation to two main lines of intervention. In the first case, especially the programmes implemented in schools with the involvement of the teaching staff can be defined mostly as primary prevention projects, i.e. designed for a general youth population, which has not necessarily yet manifested particular risk factors, nor it has expressed positions or enacted behaviours considered as signs of a possible radicalisation process. In other cases, both at school and in the juvenile penal circuit or in other informal educational contexts, prevention actions are aimed at providing educators with the skills to operate early detection of potential radicalisation paths or of developmental trajectories that are expected to translate in forms of violent expression.

The article refers to a multi-year research carried out in the framework of several action-research projects aimed at analysing the management of religious plurality and cultural diversity in the space of Italian public institutions (prisons, hospitals, and schools), through ethnographic observations, interviews and focus groups with social actors involved in the different contexts. For this article, we considered the data regarding the school context, starting from an analysis of the documentation at

international, European, and national level, concerning both the regulatory and guideline level (documents, guidelines, law proposals), and the project level of educational proposals, and integrating the observations and testimonies collected during the ethnographic fieldwork.

An attempt will be made to outline the panorama of the prevention of jihadist violent radicalism implemented at school in Italy, analysing the theoretical-methodological assumptions and their translation into specific programmes and actions. The paper will then focus on the contribution that an intercultural and critical approach can bring to the school context. It is described as a perspective based also on knowledge and familiarisation with different religions, on dialogue and involvement of “communities” and religious authorities and on the application of an intercultural mediation system that is also oriented to the religious dimension of the students’ and their families’ lives.

Regulatory framework, guidelines, and recommendations at European level

The European Union (Council of the European Union, 2005) recognizes prevention as one of the four pillars of the strategy to fight terrorism (“prevent, protect, pursue, respond”). Among the priorities identified by the document, in addition to interventions that we could define of secondary prevention, referred to early detection and treatment of a problem already manifested in some degree (such as incorrect use of internet or proselytism and recruitment practices), interventions of primary prevention are also suggested, that are aimed at building a welcoming social context, characterized by “good governance, democracy, education and economic prosperity” (p. 9) and the development of intercultural dialogue.

The first communications of the Commission of the European Communities (2005), in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Madrid, in March 2004, and of London, in July 2005, outlines the first indications for the definition of a European strategy declined in the long term, “to address the factors which contribute to radicalization and recruitment to terrorist activities” (p. 2). The text identifies as privileged sectors of intervention, among others, “Education, young engagement and active European citizenship” (p. 5) and “Encouraging Integration, Inter-cultural Dialogue and Dialogue with Religions” (p. 6). The definition of these two lines of action, on the one hand, recognises youth as a life period particularly at risk, due to greater vulnerability, and, on the other hand, it highlights how the theme of intercultural and interreligious dialogue constitutes an important ground to

build prevention interventions upon. In this regard, also the lines of action already consolidated in the European field (such as those included in the European “Youth” and “Culture” or in the “Socrates” programmes), are recognised as consistent with the objectives of combating violent radicalisation, because of their focus on integration, promotion of active social participation, intercultural awareness, and fight against racism and xenophobia. A final aspect introduced by this document is the emphasis placed on the importance of fostering “dialogue between States and Religions” (p. 7). Such point lays the foundations for an articulated approach reflecting the complexity of social reality and the relationship between the religious and political spheres. While reaffirming that “the relations between the State and Churches and religious associations is not a UE competence” (*ibid.*), the document claims for the European Commission a tradition of contacts and initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue between religions and between States and religions.

A following document issued by the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of Member States (2016) identifies three axes of intervention for the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism: in addition to the “security dimension” (p. 2) and “countering terrorist propaganda and hate speech online” (*ibid.*), it emphasises the “preventive role of education and youth work” (*ibid.*). On the one hand, the focus is on young people and the skills to be developed, not only cognitive skills, but also “social, civic and intercultural competences, communication and conflict resolution skills, empathy, responsibility, critical thinking and media literacy” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the document invites the Member States “to broaden the competences of teachers, educators and other teaching staff to be able to recognise early signs of radicalised behaviour and hold ‘difficult conversations’, which open a dialogue with students and other young people about sensitive topics related to personal feelings, principles, and beliefs” (p. 3).

Starting from these reflections, documents have been produced, particularly within the framework of the Radicalisation Awareness Network, that are more targeted to the school (Nordbruch, 2016; Nordbruch & Sieckelinck, 2018; Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2015), which, together with an interpretation of the problem, they offer a guidance both to governments, to support effective programmes in schools (Davies & Limbada, 2019), and to educational institutions and teachers, to propose activities aimed at students (Lenos & Keltjens, 2017, 2016; Young et al., 2014). These proposals are not only centred on the reduction of the various risk factors (ranging from individual and psychological factors, relational and group factors, to social and macrosocial factors), a process presented as

complex and not always realistic and feasible. By proposing interventions based on strengths (rather than deficits), they also and above all aim to identify and strengthen protective factors, as well as to promote positive factors and wellbeing and, therefore, to develop both individual and social resilience processes and empowerment, of individuals and of the context (Lenos & Keijzer, 2018; Stieckelinck & Gielen, 2018).

Some of these texts present concrete tools to be used in the classroom, offering precise methodological and procedural indications. For example, Lenos and Keijzer (2018) identify the use of testimonials from victims and formers (i.e. people who were part of a violent extremist group and then left it) as an effective tool for promoting resilience in students. In addition to indications on how to introduce them in classroom, the authors also present some exemplary projects. A UNESCO text (2016), on the other hand, focuses on how to prepare, conduct, and manage a fruitful classroom discussion on the topic of violent extremism, in order to foster learning processes in both the cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioural domains, and to help children develop the skills to become informed citizens who can actively participate in civic life.

The publications of the Radicalisation Awareness Network reflect the objectives of the organization that, on the one hand, prefer a so called “safeguard” orientation, in other words the prevention of radicalization processes and the implementation of “disengagement” paths, if the approach to violent extremist groups has already occurred, instead of a preventive approach of the security type, that is of direct prevention of the terrorist act (Capozzoli, 2021). On the other hand, the RAN approach proposes a “holistic” vision of violent radicalization phenomenon that does not focus only on the so-called jihadist-type, rather preferring to consider other forms of radicalization, that refer to other ideological frameworks, and observing both extremes of the polarization process: in this sense, jihadist radicalization is opposed to Islamophobic or white supremacist movements (Capozzoli, 2021). Consistent with these approaches, in the examined documents, the reference to Islam appears blurred and, in some cases, even absent. After affirming, therefore, that “the main threat currently comes from terrorism that is underlined by an abusive interpretation of Islam” (Council of the European Union, 2005, p. 2), it is hastened to specify that the interpretation of this phenomenon is carried out through concepts that can be applied to other radicalization types, referring to other ideological frameworks. However, even if, analysing the case of “terrorist groups, abusively claiming their legitimacy in the name of Islam” (p. 11), the documents recognise the multifactorial and complex causes of violent radicalisation, that include experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and, as mentioned above, they

emphasise the importance of working for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, inclusion and anti-discrimination, they do not address in a substantial way other important issues that are particularly felt by Muslim communities, such as the lack of de facto respect for religious freedom for Muslims living in European societies.

The Italian situation: laws, models, and projects

If we consider Italy, we could say that this difficulty becomes even more evident, for two main reasons.

First of all, within the European framework of the guidelines on school-based prevention of violent radicalisation, Italy still seems to operate according to an “implicit model” that, by analogy with what has been theorised by Ambrosini (2001) regarding immigrant inclusion policies, we could describe as characterised by good and virtuous local practices, spreading unevenly throughout the territory, often on the initiative of committed administrators, managers or teachers, but which is not reflected in legislative measures or in shared official guidelines and documents. In Italy, the phenomenon of jihadist-type violent radicalisation has occurred in significantly less serious and widespread forms than in other north-western European countries. This is acknowledged also in a 2017 document by the “Study Commission on the phenomenon of radicalisation and jihadist extremism”, a panel set up by the Italian Government, bringing together some of the leading experts in the field at national level, and coordinated by Professor Vidino. Therefore, albeit in a condition of lesser alert and emergency than other European states, Italy has taken steps to address the issue, starting with actions (such as the establishment of this commission) for the study and analysis of the phenomenon, in order to promote the “development of a necessary Italian strategy for the prevention of radicalisation” (Study Commission on the phenomenon of radicalisation and jihadist extremism, 2017). This commitment, however, has not yet resulted in the definition of national guidelines or in an agreed and coordinated plan of action in the various sectors of public life, not least that of the school, which would have allowed to break free from the so-called implicit model.

Secondly, Muslim communities in Italy are stuck in a particularly disadvantageous status, related to the fact that they are not fully recognised in the public space, starting with the stalemate over the missed signing of the agreement (*Intesa*) with the State. Mr Dambruoso and others proposed a national bill named ‘Measures for the prevention of the radicalisation of violent jihadist extremism’, which was approved in the Chamber of Deputies

in July 2017 and forwarded to the Senate of the Republic where, however, it stalled. In the following legislature (XVIII Legislature), the bill was resubmitted to the Chamber of Deputies under the signature of Mr Fiano (Bill No. 243, presented on 23 March 2018). The document, which deals specifically with jihadist-type violent extremism, reiterates, in the introductory report, the cautious rhetoric of rejection of radicalism-terrorism-Islam equation. The intention of the measure, which emerges from what is declared in the report accompanying the proposal, is “to add to the necessary measures of intelligence and repression (...) a different element, inspired by the necessity of carrying out an activity of prevention”. Article 8 of the bill includes a section devoted precisely to ‘Preventive measures in schools’, with the allocation of funds for the implementation of such actions, particularly on the topics of ‘intercultural and interreligious dialogue’, ‘combating online hatred’ and ‘global citizenship knowledge and skills for school integration and intercultural education’. The funds provide for the strengthening of network infrastructures and connectivity of schools and for training and updating of staff and school leaders. The provision contained in this bill emphasises the need to draw up “guidelines on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, aimed at spreading the culture of pluralism and at preventing episodes of radicalisation” and to define “consequent actions”. The National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Students and Interculturality has been given responsibility for drafting and periodically updating the guidelines. The text, however, does not formulate any specific measures and, also with reference to the school context, it does not seem to systematically address the problematic issues reported both by school stakeholder and by Muslim communities themselves.

A regulatory measure on the subject has reached the end of the approval process and has been issued in Lombardy, with Regional Law No. 24/2017 “Regional interventions of aid and assistance to victims of terrorism and of information, training and research to know and prevent the processes of violent radicalisation”. Paragraph 3 article 2 (“Beneficiaries of the interventions”) provides “(...) in favour of the school and university system, as well as of local police operators and third sector realities dealing with integration and prevention, information, training, and research activities to know and prevent the phenomena and processes of violent radicalisation”. This point is taken up and articulated in Article 6 (“Information, training and research interventions”) that, in paragraph 4, links knowledge and prevention of violent radicalisation phenomena to education on citizenship and respect for differences. Following the organisation of some courses realized in the schools, in 2017 and 2018, and as implementation of the law, the Region then issued a regional call “for the identification of 5 pole schools for the

activation of training courses for school managers and/or teachers on the themes of education for differences, with a view to combating all forms of violent extremism”. In the call, extremism leading to the expression of violent behaviour is understood in a broader sense, including its political, religious, ideological, and cultural connotations. The prevention of extremism, therefore, is associated with “education for difference” and comes to include “also all activities regarding inter-culture, education for respect, religious dialogue, education on gender issues, fight against prejudice and different forms of racism and bullying”.

Lacking national legal frameworks and guidelines at ministerial level that make explicit reference to the prevention of violent radicalisation, several training programmes aimed at teachers have been proposed at local level. One of the most structured courses was proposed by Exit Società Cooperativa Sociale, starting from the 2017/2018 school year, and addressed to teachers and school managers belonging to the School Offices of some Italian regions and, in particular, of Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche. The course (“For a didactic of prevention of all forms of violent radicalisation”) includes two levels: a basic level and an advanced level. In the first level course, particular emphasis is placed on the identification of radical narratives and, in line with international guidelines, the transmission of skills to manage classroom discussions on sensitive and polarising topics. In the second level course, on the other hand, the aim is to transmit and develop competences related to the implementation of prevention actions that could be defined as secondary level, i.e. concerning “the identification and early intervention of individuals at risk”¹.

Another training proposal directed to teachers and school managers was the Advanced Training Course “The Trans-Mediterranean space and the Islamic world: integration in public spaces and in the school context”. The training, carried out in two editions, in the years 2020 and 2021, by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan and the University of Rome 3, in collaboration with the Universities of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, is part of the PriMED Project - Prevention and Interaction in the Trans-Mediterranean Space, financed by the Ministry of Education, University and Research through the call for proposals “Establishment of Italian university networks in implementation of cooperation agreements between Italian universities and those of States belonging to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation” (Directorial Decree no. 3089 of 16/11/2018 - ID

¹ text available at [http://www.marche.istruzione.it/allegati/2020/m_pi.AOODRMA.REGISTRO%20UFFICIALE\(U\).0002327.04-02-2020.pdf](http://www.marche.istruzione.it/allegati/2020/m_pi.AOODRMA.REGISTRO%20UFFICIALE(U).0002327.04-02-2020.pdf), 30/06/2021.

82382). The themes of extremism and radicalisation are dealt with as part of a training course mainly focused on the development of intercultural competences, with reference to religious diversity and Islam in particular, “to the stereotypes linked to it, to its representations and forms of communication”².

For an intercultural and critical approach

The scientific literature on the subject shows how, for years now, Italian schools have been committed to proposing interventions, albeit of varying quality and with different results, for the promotion of intercultural education, which is considered one of the keystones of a cultural and educational project aimed at fostering the strengthening of social cohesion, as well as the scholastic success of all students, regardless of their starting conditions (see, among others, Santerini, 2010). In 2007, a document of the Ministry of Education outlined the “Italian way for intercultural schools and the integration of foreign pupils”. To this end, it recalls how school should not limit itself to the commitment to the integration of “immigrant pupils” and it proposes, rather, a definition of intercultural education based on the assumption of “diversity as a paradigm of the school’s own identity, a privileged opportunity to be open to all differences”. The intercultural perspective is not, in fact, referred only to migratory processes, to the presence of people (children and young people or families, in this case) coming from “elsewhere”, but concerns “ourselves, the way we live and look at the world” (Mantovani, 2008, p. 18).

The instances of change that are solicited both by the school and by Muslim communities, and which refer to the plural composition of society, do not only concern Muslim pupils or families, but result in a transformation that affects the school and its protagonists in a more wide-ranging process. The religious sphere has been considered one among the different dimensions that define the cultural plurality of the school environment. Often, and particularly with reference to Islam, religion has become the subject of a public debate, fuelled by the mass media, which has focused on defending the symbols of Christianity from an alleged threat, coinciding with a feared attack on Christian identity roots. Emblematic cases were the discussions on the advisability of displaying the crucifix, that is considered as a symbol of Christianity, in the classroom, or of celebrating religious

² Text available at <https://primed-miur.it/dirigenti-scolastici-e-insegnanti/>, 30/06/2021.

festivities, involving all the pupils (for example in the creation of “little handicrafts” as gifts or in exchanging greetings for religious festivities).

The more substantial and relevant issues, as stated by both managers and teachers, and pupils and their families, on the other hand, have rarely become the subject of public debate and, in any case, have not been discussed in legislation nor have they been addressed in a systematic and structural manner on a national scale. As emerges by the literature (Alessi & Puletti, 2019; Cuciniello & Pasta, 2020), and by the field-based action-research activity carried out by Rhazzali, Italian schools are not always prepared to deal effectively with the challenge posed by religious plurality in the public sphere, whereas, instead, it would be necessary to apply an intercultural approach that is also attentive to the religious dimensions. Schools are called upon to rethink their curricula, proposing an intercultural didactic approach that succeeds in reinventing in an intercultural key the different knowledges that makes up the educational offer (Fiorucci, 2011).

A first critical point (Rhazzali, 2018) concerns the teaching of religion in schools. In fact, Muslim families often point out the lack of a real and valid educational and didactic alternative for their children, to the teaching of the Catholic religion. The teaching of religion in schools should thus be rethought from a historical and comparative point of view, considering how religions move and change in everyday life, in order to provide a basic knowledge, free from the sedimentation and reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices that are not only produced in common rhetoric, but sometimes also through textbooks. The rethinking of religious teaching, with a special focus on Islam, would lead to greater knowledge for all students, including Muslims. Representatives of local religious communities, such as heads of Islamic centres, imams, and religious guides, could be actively involved in the educational project, thus enhancing a significant proactive role within the social context, which could be recognised and promoted in public space and institutions.

This element introduces a second relevant point: the importance of adopting a so-called multiagency approach (Battistelli, 2013; Rhazzali, 2018). Along with the figures who normally “inhabit” the school context, in fact, other protagonists are involved by the school, especially when some problem emerges in the classroom or in the relationships with the families of Muslim pupils. An important figure is the intercultural mediator. Because of their cultural and intercultural skills and the observation of behaviour and relational dynamics, the mediators may be able to understand and highlight conflicts and contrasts, which in some way intercept the theme of religion, in the class group, in the parents-children’s relationships or even in relations between school and family, intervening to help resolve the conflict.

Intercultural mediators can also play an important role in identifying the signs that could presage the beginning of radicalisation process (Rhazzali, 2018). The implementation of this mediation mechanism, however, is not guaranteed to the same extent, let alone in a stable and structural way, in all school contexts, also due to the scarcity of available economic. However, a significant investment should be made in training the various people who work together in mediation (intercultural mediators themselves, but also teachers, school administrators and psychologists working in schools) on the phenomenon of violent radicalisation, but also on issues concerning the religious dimension.

Conclusions

As we have tried to highlight by reconstructing the ways the theme of the contrast and prevention of violent extremism and in particular of the processes of radicalisation in the school contexts has been taken up by Italian public policies, the concrete level of regulatory provisions and actions implemented by the institutions has not gone beyond some positive expressions of intent and some significative but isolated experiences. This picture emerges despite the progressive affirmation of the awareness of the need to interpret these phenomena within the overall framework of the transformations experienced by Italian society in recent decades and, consequently, to devise forms of intervention that act not only repressively on the epiphenomena, but, above all, proactively on the overall dynamics that constitute the premise of these phenomena, At the same time, a multiform panorama of initiatives inspired by the practice of intercultural dialogue and mediation has taken shape in the schools. They often succeeded in producing significant results which, however, are conditioned by the absence of theoretical models and overall regulatory and organisational frameworks and by the chronic lack of material resources. In any case, the set of results produced by the experimented practices and those achieved by the scientific research programmes that have been activated on these topics now seem to outline a picture of critical issues to be overcome and of perspectives through which to increase the scope of interventions.

A focus on subjects considered at risk of radicalisation, identified based on ethnic-religious indicators, is unlikely to be successful, if it neglects the need to involve all the components of the schools in the development of a response to the need to interpret the present moment of a plural society and to root the fight against all forms of intolerance and violence in a proposal based on a concrete enhancement of differences.

The sense of alarm that inevitably seems to accompany the presence of Muslims in schools should be converted into a consideration of the religious dimension as a non-negligible element in the cultural experience lived in schools, offering students the necessary daily exercise of reading reality and offering intellectually and morally rewarding alternatives to those proposed by stereotypes propagating conflict. In this regard, it is worth noting the importance of a multi-agency approach, in which the school space dialogues with the different contexts in which the lives of its students take place, starting with the family and the communities to which they belong, and with the figures who in various ways practice intercultural mediation.

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