FROM SAFE TO BRAVE SPACES

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INTRODUCTION

> “A place where we are able to study. A place where we can retreat if things are not going well at home. A place where we can get together with our friends because it is not possible at home. A place where we can confide in someone when we are struggling. A place where all kinds of activities can take place, and everyone can take initiatives. An accessible place that feels like home, with professional supervisors and care providers, present and approachable. A place where people always listen to you without judging, where there is always hope and perspective is sought. Based on one extremely strong foundation: trust and proximity. In short, a place to chill and much more.

A few years ago, some Antwerp young people and youth workers dreamed ‘their’ place. In the meantime, that place has been created and was called ‘Safe Space VZW’. That name is no coincidence. The concept of a safe space comes from the United States, where it was originally used mainly amongst Black university students. They asked for their own *safe spaces* so that they could come together as *an affinity group* without being confronted with or insulted by discriminatory views. More recently, such exclusive places also emerged in the wake of Black Lives Matter and other emancipatory movements.

In the meantime, the concept has become equally common in Europe, among the same groups but also in self-organisations of ethnic-cultural minorities, in social work, education and in youth work. There, too, the term points at a ‘safe’ space’ that is exclusively for a certain group. For the time being, theory formation on the concept is scarce. For researchers and scholars, safe spaces remains a difficult concept to define, even though it is increasingly used and is probably here to stay.

In the European Interreg project ORPHEUS – with partners from Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom – the term safe space also arose. The initial reason for starting ORPHEUS was the prevention of violent extremism among young people in vulnerable situations. But, unlike the mainstream approach at the time, ORPHEUS did not want to focus on ‘deradicalisation’. Focusing on deradicalisation offers young people limited room to express their grievances. For young people, the risk of stigmatisation and social alienation increases. For supervisors in youth work and education, the relationship of trust as the basis for a pedagogical relationship is endangered.

The starting point of ORPHEUS was prevention and finding means to strengthen the resilience of young people. In concrete terms, this would take shape in ‘safe spaces’ that were defined in the application documents as: *“a location where young people can meet each other, supported by professionals they trust. In these safe spaces, delicate topics can be discussed comfortably, young people are encouraged to connect with social institutions and they are supported in publicly expressing grievances; these safe spaces are designed in such a way that they allow us to provide pedagogical support instead of disproportionate repressive responses.”*[1]

During the process, pilot projects were set up in Mechelen, Antwerp, Portsmouth, Dordrecht and Dunkirk. We soon discovered that the initial description of a safe space does not always correspond with the complex reality of organisations and their local context. That is why it was decided to organise the safe spaces from the bottom up as experiments and to learn from these concrete practices.

We also wanted to investigate whether these safe spaces enable young people to reflect on their experiences and develop resilience towards exclusion mechanisms in society. In other words: can safe spaces become breeding grounds for emancipatory work with young people? Later in the project we would redefine this as: can safe spaces evolve to ‘brave spaces’?

We have confronted our experiences from the pilot projects with other analogue practices and international literature on the subject. The result is this publication. We share what we have learned about safe spaces and their possible use in prevention work in the context of youth work and education. We investigate how young people can be more than mere participants and can take their own initiatives and, finally, look at how these safe spaces can evolve to brave spaces.

1 THE CONCEPT OF SAFE SPACES

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE CONCEPT

Although safe spaces appear in pedagogical environments such as schools and youth work, there is some controversy surrounding the concept. Safe spaces are regularly associated with the equally foggy concept of 'woke'[2]. People do not know what is happening in those spaces and presumably that is precisely why these arouse nervousness and sometimes aversion among policymakers, school- and other boards – but also among some youth workers and teachers. How can this be explained?

DISTRUSTFUL OUTSIDERS

Working with safe space can indeed be controversial. Although it is not always clear whether this has to do with the concept itself, or with the content that is discussed. Locally and internationally, we see safe spaces on university campuses and within feminine, LGBTQIA+ activism or anti-racist projects.[3] They have one thing in common. It seems that they all are committed to social justice and respect for diversities. But in the literature one can find completely different groups for example 'Doomsday Preppers' and 'Survivalists' who also maintain intense and often private contacts in order to secretly prepare for the chaos that is coming.

Other examples, closer to youth work, do not bear the label of safe space but have all the hallmarks of it. When Molenbeek young people and youth workers beheld the rubble in which their municipality ended up after the attacks in Paris and Brussels, they retreated. In isolation far away from the crowd and the media, they gathered and tried to find meaning and purpose to this calamity that struck their neighbourhood and lives and came out strengthened and more resilient. Even less visible[4] are closed groups of all kinds on shadowy social media platforms. From the far right to young people who cling together in the obscure gaming media channels without prying eyes.[5]

Common in all the above examples is alleged or perceived insecurity and the tendency to withdraw or shut down. Trust, a classic concept from youth work, is indeed under pressure. Distrust seems to be a fundamental characteristic, with the possible risk that participants in such safe spaces get stuck in an in/outsider position and wallow in a victim role, blaming the others.

EXCLUSIVE VS. INCLUSIVE

Apparently, people like to retreat to a safe space based on an identity or on shared traumatic experiences. Such a place becomes a safe space when people have the feeling they can be themselves and speak out. Often this also means that they distance themselves. Distance from the perpetrators or the sources of their grievances, for example police officers who invariably harass or chase them with identity checks, but they also from teachers, school culture or youth workers who 'cannot or do not want to understand them'.

At the same time, this *exclusive* characteristic excludes other people, which often causes resentment. A bit strange, because we live in a society that is teeming with 'exclusive' clubs, groups, atmospheres and events. But apparently this is not given to everyone. Safe spaces for people with experiences of discrimination apparently disrupt the self-image of our *inclusive* society. "We are inclusive, why do they still have to isolate themselves?"

Many communities, organisations, schools or youth organisations are indeed convinced that they are 'safe'. That they are a

place where everyone enjoys protection and has the freedom to be themselves (as long as the freedom of the other is not restricted)." The demand for safe spaces smears this image. Separate swimming hours for specific groups or hate-speech-free spaces are just a few examples. The 'cis-man-free-pub' destroys the tolerant image that a city has of itself or its leisure economy. Apparently, certain groups don't share the experience of safety. They separate or isolate themselves or just want to discuss their experiences of insecurity and failed inclusivity, even in schools and youth work activities.

EMANCIPATION

At first glance, this seems to be an irreconcilable contradiction, but literature and practices show that this exclusivity position can be a defensible momentum in a process towards emancipation and activism towards a so-called 'inclusive' society.

After all, the above remarks about 'lived' feelings of insecurity, distrust and exclusivity are only one side of the coin. In literature and local examples, we notice that safe spaces are just as often associated with emancipatory ambitions. For example, safe space literature refers a lot to feminist movements at the end of the last century. They too created safe spaces to discuss and exchange experiences of discrimination. At the same time, they identified the backgrounds of this injustice and analysed their own social position and environment. From there, strategies and forms of action against the patriarchy, the definition of the situation, grew. The same thing happened within LGBTQIA+ groups and among people of colour. The experiences they shared in their safe spaces rarely matched the average idea of safety. That is why conscientisation is a fundamental aspect in safe spaces. From there on, they upset the apple cart to address perceived injustice, engage in the social debate and organise actions.

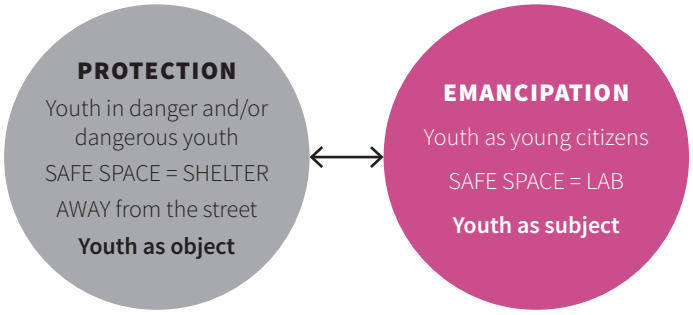
THE TENSION BETWEEN EMANCIPATION AND PROTECTION

With the creation of safe spaces, ORPHEUS quickly ended up in a field of tension that is not new for youth work or for education: the tension between **emancipatory work** and the tradition of **protecting children and young people**.

At one end there is **protection** in a safe place, away from society, where young people are allocated a protected environment and can have fun, play, experiment and learn. A safe space as a shelter, protected from external influences and even protected from the unpredictability of their own behaviour. Protection refers to the discussions mentioned above on trust and distrust, safety, and insecurity, exclusivity and inclusiveness. At the very end of the continuum there is a 100% safe shelter or a bench in which young people are completely isolated or safeguarded from risks, whether or not overprotected by supervisors who want to keep them away from the street.

At the other end there is the **emancipation** dimension in a safe place where young people share experiences, learn to see and understand forms of exclusion better and learn to think critically. A safe space on this side is seen as a mobilising lab, where young would-be citizens can experiment with forms of participation with the outside world. Later in this publication we will refer to this as a 'brave space'. Emancipation refers to discussions about awareness raising, conscientisation and identity formation, psychological processing of traumas and activism. At this end of the continuum, the safe space is broken open as young people publicly stand up against forms of the injustice they experience.

It goes without saying that an outspoken activism can have disruptive effects for organisations or society, examples are youth protesting for climate, #METOO issues and Black Lives Matter.



Safe spaces are therefore of all kinds, as the literature has already shown. But in the context of deradicalisation, the concept of **protection** is a central issue and safe spaces are thus very tempting. However, it is not always clear who should be protected from whom and from what. Society certainly, but also the young people? There are examples of failed prevention in which one goes back to early-intervention, through repressive measures in certain neighbourhoods, so-called hotspots or risk zones. All in the interest of the community and – allegedly – also in the interest of the young people themselves.[6]

Specifically, ORPHEUS started from the idea that 'protection' of young people against, for example, 'grooming' is of course

legitimate, but should not evolve to removing young people from public space, out of sight of the community. That is why ORPHEUS opted for an **emancipation model**: young people have the right to have their own place, a lab where they can safely experiment and gain skills, but it must be more. After all, there is another pitfall in the emancipation model. A lab in a secluded place can start from the idea that young people are 'not yet' sufficiently ready to participate in society and should therefore be protected in quiet, safe spaces. In this way, one risks missing the point and the difference with the protection-model would be only marginal. In the ORPHEUS lab, it is indeed the intention that young people, by building courage and self-confidence, will eventually participate in real social debates as equals.

It is up to youth work and education to be aware of the dangers of separation, overprotection and feeding the victim role or vulnerable position, and so to guard the full emancipatory ambitions of their safe spaces; to allow young people to free themselves from images, self-images and practices that stifle or hinder their development and participation opportunities; to always see the exploration with companions or peers as a necessary moment in a process that leads from their lab to society.

BROADENING THE CONCEPT

In the ORPHEUS pilot projects, open experiments were set up, with numerous activities, workshops and discussions, sometimes at the request of young people, sometimes introduced by professionals, always with varying results.[7] The course of all these activities were erratic and iterative, partly due to organisational problems and of course also due to the pandemic. Covid measures forced us to also research and further develop online working methods. In short, the initial concept of safe space broadened:

FROM PLACES TO SPACES

Sometimes a safe space was perceived as a comfortable 'place' from which all danger was excluded – the classic idea – but at other times it was set as a 'specific activity', regardless of the location. Of course, formal localised safe spaces were clearly visible, but when youth activities had to withdraw during the lockdowns, it turned out that young people themselves sometimes organised their own informal safe spaces, far away from professionals, teachers or youth workers. When professionals joined them, that same place was not always perceived as safe anymore. Even in schools with explicit safe space activities or locations, young people sometimes found and retreated into their own places.

FROM OFFLINE TO ONLINE

The Covid measures challenged youth workers. Some kept in touch with their pupils as much as possible through WhatsApp groups or other social media. For hard-to-reach young people, creative solutions were sought, such as online gaming, in groups or individually.[8] Working online was challenging and new to most professionals, but in many cases opened unexpected opportunities, including safe spaces.

FROM SO-CALLED SAFE TO POROUS

For some young people, school or youth work can indeed be a safer environment than the home situation or the street. But this is not true for everyone or always the case. Sometimes conflicts from the outside world seeped into so-called safe places and safe spaces turned out to be more porous than they seemed. Discussions about specific themes – for example, the feeling of insecurity that girls experienced on their way to their safe youth centre – led to new safe spaces activities in Portsmouth within a so-called safe environment.

FROM METHODOLOGY TO MINDSET

During the pilot projects, the purpose and process of the safe space methodology was not always easy to describe. The evolution is strongly dependent on the knowledge and capabilities of the group. Also, what people learn is very unpredictable. It can be about shared experiences of injustice, but also about skills or insight into group dynamics. That is why professionals from the pilot projects increasingly defined safe space as an 'attitude' or a 'mindset'. Only when the atmosphere or climate was perceived as safe, only when there was room for everyone's input and people trusted each other and agreed to disagree, did young people start to speak more freely.

FROM SAFE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO ALSO SAFE FOR SUPERVISORS

The concept of safe space is by definition open-ended. Young people are given the space to have their say. As a supervisor, that often means searching, failing and starting all over, adjusting plans and schedules and trying again to find new roads not taken yet. In some more formal contexts this clashes with

the 'regulations' and unspoken principles of the organisation. Youth work often has well-defined and measurable prevention objectives, schools have even stricter and more defined boundaries. The unpredictability of a safe space requires trust from the organisation in the operation and in the supervisors, and that is not always evident.[9]

FROM SAFE TO SAFE ENOUGH

The evaluation of the pilot projects showed that young people do not want sterile, safe conversations. Conflicts, tensions and grievances must not be set aside, but on the contrary. Slogans such as 'we are a school without racism' or 'girls and boys are equal in our youth centre' are not enough. The reality is much more complex and young people feel this unerringly. A safe space should therefore not be 'just safe' but should be 'safe enough'. The literature also warns against neutral, sterile spaces where people close themselves off from any possible offense or conflict. This rigid safety may well be appropriate at a certain moment, but in the context of youth work or education it can hardly be the finality of a safe space. If agendas, themes or power relations are hidden or ignored, young people drop out. The learning process in a safe space includes the space for debate, dispute and for expressing and learning to deal with opposing opinions and conflicts.

DISCUSSION BOX

- Are there safe spaces in your organisation?
- How do you describe these? As 'safe space' or do you use a different name?
- What are the main intentions in working with safe spaces?
- Where do you situate these safe spaces in the spectrum from protection to emancipation?
- Think further about the influence of the context in which you work (youth work, education, self-organisation, prevention service). What effect does the context, the setting and the guidance have on the safe space with young people? What possibilities and limitations do you see?

2 SAFE SPACES IN PREVENTION WORK

Even though safe spaces raise many questions amongst policy-makers, schools and other boards, they are increasingly being used, including in the context of prevention work. Professionals are instructed to work with safe spaces for young people on sensitive and delicate issues. These are, in many cases, induced, defined or prescribed by the local (prevention) policy. The main advantage is supposed to be that 'problems' can be solved in a participatory way.

Sometimes this starts from the idea that young people are 'alienated', that although they are still involved in the community, they seem to react inappropriately and therefore cause insecurity. In other words: that vision starts from the dysfunction of the person.[10] Depending on who sets up the safe space, the approach may differ. Sometimes the emphasis is on increasing safety in society. How can these young people be reintegrated or reconnected in the community? Sometimes the goal is mainly preventing young people from derailing or drifting away, and the focus is on the care for young people.

This approach is very top down: safe space as an instrument of policy making. The question is whether this approach really works in addressing security, participation and alienation.

ORPHEUS certainly saw it as one of its tasks to look at prevention in a different way.

PREVENTION: A WIN-WIN?

But first we discussed the concept of prevention itself. Social prevention is not a new focus and has been an essential part of social work and youth work for decades. Yet there is still no clarity about the concept. Even though 'being proactive in dealing with' seems to be the biggest common denominator, the question remains 'what is prevented?'. What should be avoided? And how can this be obtained?

Often the answer is that prevention promotes the well-being and independence of people which, in the long term, reduces requests for help and diminishes the total cost to society. In other words, the more focus on prevention, the less one has to focus on (more expensive) repression and punishment. A win-win situation for society and young people.

However, several researchers question this. The research into the effects of the deradicalisation policy and initiatives on youth welfare work shows that this 'win-win' is not so simple. After the attacks in Brussels, both youth workers and young people reacted with mixed feelings to the way in which prevention was implemented. Young people who were supposed to be in danger of radicalisation had to be deradicalised. The result was that Muslim youth felt targeted, neighbourhoods were criminalised, e.g., Molenbeek, the 'hellhole'. Willem Schinkel[11] coined the concept 'prepression' in this context. In that atmosphere, a number of youth organisations resolutely refused to accept project grants that would drive them in that direction.[12] [13]

> "The Flemish policy approach has been dragging its feet on the mainstream view of 'radicalisation' as a process in which radical religious beliefs are the first step towards

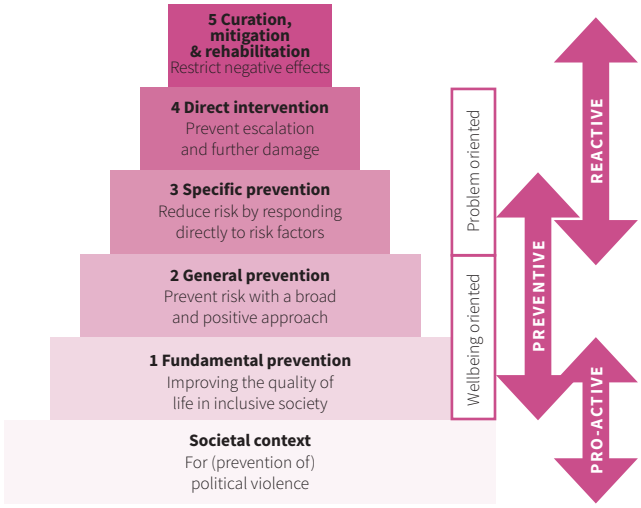
violence. Not only is the scientific basis for this reasoning very weak, it even threatens to strengthen the breeding ground of political violence in our society: social exclusion and the limitation of opportunities for vulnerable young people to denounce this exclusion. If a Muslim youth dares to denounce perceived injustice, then this can be considered a sign of... radicalisation. In addition, the emphasis is on the early detection of young people who are 'at risk of radicalisation'. On the one hand, this infinitely broadens the target group who runs the risk of running the risk. On the other hand, prevention is severely narrowed down to early detection. The increasing pressure to cooperate in such detection of 'radicalising' young people puts youth workers under great pressure. It undermines their necessary relationship of trust with these young people.[14]

A safe space has something protective in its name, so it is not surprising that all those who are working on the themes of danger and safety like to embrace it. But within this narrow scope on prevention work, a safe space risks losing many of its opportunities. Within ORPHEUS we therefore started looking for other perspectives.

PREVENTION ACCORDING TO ORPHEUS

There is a plethora of schemes that try to explain prevention approaches. Each of them has its own accents. ORPHEUS opted for a specific focus on strengthening young people (instead of on repression) and on expanding the space for young people (instead of limiting it).

That is why we developed our own adaptation of Deklerck's prevention model:[15]



Framework for the integral prevention of radicalisation towards political violence – Görgöz, Vanhove & Van Bouchaute, elaborated on the model of Deklerck, J. (2006)

It is noteworthy to point at the fact that the entire prevention-pyramid is built on the ground level of the '**social context**'. Good prevention work is embedded in efforts to improve the quality of people's wider social context. Furthermore, the model distinguishes five levels of prevention. In (1) fundamental and (2) general prevention, the emphasis is mainly on broad well-being. (3) specific prevention and (4) direct intervention are more problem-oriented forms of prevention, while (5) curation is actually no longer prevention work but aims to limit or stop the negative effects.

At the different levels of prevention, a distinction is made between working on:

- **Influencing the attitudes or mindset** of the involved actors: raising awareness or conscientisation, participation and consultation, information, greater involvement of citizens and field workers, etc.

- **Structural measures** with an impact on the context of the actors involved: organisational measures (roadmap, protocols, etc.), technical measures (security, control of risk zones, etc.) and policy measures (equal opportunities in education, discrimination tests, new services, etc.).

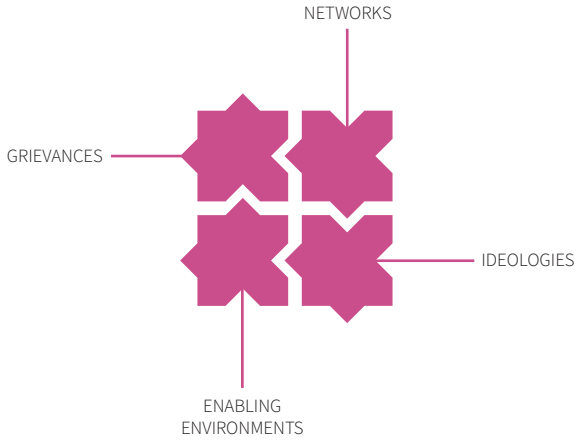
The scheme does not indicate different phases and does not start from the idea of a succession of prevention efforts over time. On the contrary, the model implies that the analysis of a problem leads to appropriate measures at different levels, with particular attention to avoiding counterproductive effects of some (more problem-oriented) measures at other levels of prevention. The prevention pyramid is not a safety chain, but it is true that focusing at lower levels prevents the need for investments at the higher levels.

Very important in this model is the level of **fundamental prevention** (1). Working on quality of life in an inclusive society also has a preventive effect. Prevention is not only about avoiding future problem behaviour, it is a basic right with a direct effect on the coexistence or conviviality of citizens. Or vice versa: prevention policy must not disturb or deteriorate the quality of coexistence. The American political philosopher Nancy Fraser argues that a society is only just if every citizen can participate in all areas of social life.[16] The result: prevention work must

therefore also pay attention to the general living conditions of young people. The more problem-oriented forms of prevention are higher up in the pyramid.

ORPHEUS chose to focus on prevention levels (1) to (3), where safe spaces offer many opportunities.

And when it comes to the level of specific prevention (3), directly focused on risk factors, ORPHEUS opted for the use of Hafez & Mullins' puzzle model[17].



How could processes of violent extremism in a society be explained? How do people get involved? Many explanatory models speak of a process of different steps. But in their review of empirical research Hafez & Mullins note that there is insufficient basis for this explanation. Such linear models ignore the many and capricious paths and side paths that people, and societies follow towards violent extremism. As an alternative, they presented a puzzle model: radicalisation occurs when a number of pieces fall together. It is precisely this interplay that is very important, because each piece of the puzzle hooks into an adjacent piece. People become radicalised if they are regularly exposed to extremist stories (ideologies) and networks, if their environment also stimulates them in that direction (enabling environments) and when they do not find other channels to express their grievances.

This puzzle model allowed ORPHEUS to refine the concept of safe spaces:

- in a safe space, controversial topics can be discussed in a comfortable and safe way (ideologies).
- in a safe space, work is being done on positive social bonds (networks).
- in a safe space, the participants share and explore forms of injustice they encounter and can arm themselves together to express their grievances publicly.

FOUR AREAS OF TENSION

When setting up safe spaces in the ORPHEUS pilot projects, we encountered a number of areas of tension, linked to the above-mentioned tensions in prevention work.

TENSION 1
What is the view on the subject: vulnerable young people or young people in vulnerable situations?

In the context of prevention, people often talk about 'vulnerable' young people. The diagnosis is that they are alienated, not embedded, insufficiently socialised, etc. 'Taking action is therefore needed' – preferably preventively – to avoid problems. The illusion exists that the problem has been solved by working on their individual vulnerability. This can be healing for young people but making them **objects** of prevention will bring little real success.

Talking about or with 'young people in vulnerable positions/situations' is a completely different starting point. In that view, the focus is on 'social vulnerability'. In their contacts with society, young people have repeatedly suffered 'injuries' and experienced forms of exclusion. Seen from this perspective prevention should focus on changing situations, positions and relations rather than changing the young people. If they are to be taken seriously, their 'lived experience' must be considered. That goes beyond installing another pedagogical relationship. Leaders, youth workers, teachers, school board and environment become part of what is going on. Young people become **subjects** that are part of the network, can raise their voices, speak out and act.

TENSION 2
General prevention or specific prevention?

There is clearly a tendency towards **specific prevention**. For example, safe spaces are increasingly seen as suitable spaces for the prevention of specific problematic behaviour, aimed at risk reduction. For example, during the lockdown, youth workers of the Dutch organisation ContourdeTwern in Dordrecht were asked by the municipality to keep young people away from other young people who caused riots. They organised an online gaming competition at the time of the riots and in this way kept a lot of young people off the streets.

A more **general approach** to prevention was found especially in schools where safe spaces are used to socialise young

people through citizenship education. Important general objectives are to strengthen critical thinking, discuss sensitive topics and practice democratic decision-making. Nonetheless, this citizenship education does raise an underlying question: what is a 'good' citizen and who defines it? Within ORPHEUS we warn against a very depoliticised view of the model citizen focusing on harmonious society because after all, a democratic society inevitably involves differences between views and lifestyles of citizens. So, the 'one size fits all' model approach is not appropriate or productive.

TENSION 3
The danger of instrumentalisation

This field of tension is related to the previous one. The concept of safe space is clearly attractive for all those who work on themes such as risk, danger and safety. In recent decades, youth work – and especially when focused on socially vulnerable young people – has been increasingly involved in prevention.[18] Youth work is supposed to detect potentially dangerous young people, in the service of the government and the security services. Likewise, schools and teachers sometimes feel **instrumentalised in a security agenda**. Not everyone feels good in that evolution. This evolution threatens to put youth work and education at the service of security and compromises self-identity. Moreover, this approach has demonstrable negative effects on the self-image of young people and on the image of young people in the wider society.[19]

In a period of severe panic about terror and an increasing pressure on youth work with young people in a socially vulnerable position, the 'Uit de Marge' support centre formulated this incisively:

> Even in times of terror, our core-mission remains: starting from the leisure time, working with children and young people voluntarily on the following tracks: group-oriented leisure activities, coping with individual well-being questions and signals and bridging function with regard to the social position of the target group. Youth work is therefore situated in broad and general prevention: ensuring that young people feel good and find their place in society, while working on the structures that increase the vulnerability of children and young people, preferably with them.[20]

Fortunately, such safe spaces are not so easily instrumentalised. They have an inherent unpredictability and tend to change the definitions of situations. From an emancipation perspective this is to be welcomed, from a security or protection point of view this obviously involves risks. Jon Nicolas, supervisor of safe spaces for ORPHEUS in Portsmouth, makes this very clear:

> In my opinion, the pressures of time, budgets and fear of polarisation and extremism have led to essential developmental components of social activities being neglected, namely the appreciation of the process, the understanding of individual contexts and the importance of professional curiosity. At its best, interactive group work on social issues addresses this deficit, but it provides time and space and is not fixated on the specific. The development of relationships is essential, it affects the feeling of abandonment and offers a more nuanced insight into the lives of those we want to develop and support.

TENSION 4
Top-down or bottom-up?

Whether it concerns general or specific prevention goals, the question remains who determines those goals and what the input of young people can be? Is the starting point a specific model of society (top-down) or are they the issues of young people themselves? What if it is not the prevention policy, nor the organisations or professionals who decide what happens in the safe space, but the young people?

In the ORPHEUS pilot projects, too, we sometimes noticed a gap between the way in which professionals carry out prevention work and the issues that concern young people such as gender issues, future prospects, identity problems, and body shaming. Who decides what is given priority? Do young people remain motivated if themes that are less of concern to them end up on the agenda? If they do not feel understood or heard, trust can fade away and the safe space becomes unsafe. The next step may be for young people to install safe spaces themselves, far away from professionals. That is precisely why careful consideration must be given to the consequences of the prevention approach used on the relationship with young people. We'll do that in the next chapter.

DISCUSSION BOX

- What is the commitment to setting up safe spaces? What ideas underpin the creation of this space?
  - What do you want to promote/support? Are there any risks you want to focus on?
  - Who makes this analysis? Are young people involved in this? Why or why not?
  - How much autonomy, self-regulation and self-determination is 'allowed' to young people and professionals?
- What is the effect of the dominant discourse on safety and security?
  - Who is the subject of safety?
  - How do you try to install security? How do you avoid breaches in the relationship of trust?
  - Are there other suppressed voices or views on the issue? (e.g. by young people, youth workers, local residents)?

3 YOUNG PEOPLE IN SAFE SPACES

In mainstream radicalisation approaches, 'radicalised people' are usually perceived as victims or as criminals[21]. The latter perspective focuses on the 'monstrous ideologically driven radical' and is by definition beyond the scope of prevention policy. The only option is to isolate or neutralise. The first perception pictures a victim, often naïve, vulnerable, in most cases a young man, who has been recruited and has allowed themselves to be carried away. The latter is the focus of prevention work.

According to ORPHEUS, both images are clichés and pitfalls. Research shows that falling into violent extremism is often a last resort strategy. What young people want is first and foremost to feel good and be recognised. These objectives are different than those of prevention workers, for whom it is all about safety. An imposed end goal to socialise them in a context in which they cannot develop seems unpromising.[22]

For ORPHEUS, young people must first and foremost be seen as involved people with the possibility and longing for agency, as equal citizens who have the democratic right to express their voice. Participation has been one of the critical success factors in socio-pedagogical traditions for decades. The quality of safe space operations can increase when the organisation and management give, as much as possible, agency to those who usually undergo it: the young people themselves. When young people really have 'ownership' of the safe space, the process of self-reflection and internalisation is much stronger. That is why ORPHEUS chose to focus on the involvement and input of young people. However, giving young people a voice and 'putting them in charge' remains a challenge.

WHO OWNS THE SAFE SPACE?

This brings us to an important issue: who determines what themes and grievances will be discussed and addressed in a safe space? Or even more fundamentally: Who owns the safe space?

ORPHEUS deviated from a top-down anti-radicalisation approach. This means applying a bottom-up approach, completed by experienced youth counsellors. Nevertheless, they often think they know what the grievances of young people are. We have observed that the perspective of young people is often very different. They do acknowledge threats such as 'online disinformation' or 'extremist violence' but are wary of disproportionate attention to it. Their grievances lie in other areas: identity issues, experiences of racism and discrimination. Grievances in the field of safety are in their eyes more about experiences of insecurity on the street, conflicts between groups in their neighbourhood or online insecurity. Basic material things such as shelter and food are also very important. And will they find a place on the labour market and the housing market in the future, especially if they are people of colour?

Of course, during the ORPHEUS project, Covid was also an issue. The pandemic and the lockdowns had severe negative consequences for young people. It increased their vulnerability, both materially, financially and in terms of isolation. On the other hand, the common perceived enemy – not only the virus itself but also the measures – reduced tensions between a number of groups.

But beware, ownership does not mean: "Do it all by yourself from now on". The experience is that young people ask for and appreciate support. Coaching and group dynamics are important success factors. Moreover, personal responsibility also implies discussing the ground rules. Every safe space is a search for balance.

FOUR MODELS OF CONTROL

Based on the pilot projects in ORPHEUS and additional action research, we came up with four possible models of youth participation in safe spaces. We discuss pros and cons, give examples from practice and make some comments.

	FOUR MODELS OF CONTROL IN SAFE SPACES			
	SELF MODEL	**COACHING** MODEL	**PROFESSIONAL** MODEL	**GOVERNANCE** MODEL
	YOUNG PEOPLE AMONG THEMSELVES	**YOUNG PEOPLE + PROFESSIONAL**	**PROFESSIONAL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**	**POLICY MAKERS + PROFESSIONALS**
DEFINITION	Young people organise safe space on their own in their environment to tackle problems or avoid insecurity.	Young people have faith in an institution that seems safe for them to tackle their problems.	Professionals, in response to a need that they recognise among young people, organise a safe space to tackle problems.	Professionals will organise safe spaces on behalf of policymakers and negotiate as much space as possible to tackle problems with young people.
ADVANTAGES	Full control. Informal learning processes.	Room for control. Coach as catalyst.	Room for opinions and grievances.	Means.
DISADVANTAGES	Skills needed to make things happen.	Coaching can also be oversteering or be an obstacle.	Risk of stronger management by the organisation (top-down).	Even greater risk of loss of control. Instrumentalisation of the safe space.

MODEL 1
SELF MODEL

EXAMPLES

This model is a permanent part of the lives of young people. They meet at school, in their neighbourhood or online. They find each other and learn from each other. It becomes more structural when groups of young people organise themselves, usually around a certain need or issue. Just think of LGTBQIA+ groups. At the University of Antwerp, Muslim students support first-year students in their academic trajectory under the name **StudentFocus**. During the lockdown, the Brussels initiative **Capital**[23] brought young people together in 'Hackathons' to discuss frustrations and how they could tackle them.

OBSERVATIONS

Obviously, this model is most fit for young people. They understand and acknowledge each other quickly and work at their own pace. They are busy with things that concern them and learn in an informal way. They are among equals, which makes it easier for them to talk to each other, including about sensitive topics. Of course, these groups can also be a challenging environment. Incidentally, internal discrimination, failure and conflicts lead to searching and starting again. This has more learning potential than succeeding.

In order to organise concrete things, there must be a certain degree of skills in the group. But with the right combination of leaders and followers, something can grow, although it is not always structural and sustainable. From a preventive point of view, it could arm and prepare the young people against bigger challenges.[24]

Even though practitioners cannot organise this model, they can facilitate it and provide the necessary space. By appreciating this, professionals get in touch with what a safe space can do and mean. Receiving support, for example in the form of funding, is usually more difficult within this model.

MODEL 2
COACHING MODEL

EXAMPLES

A number of **socio-artistic workplaces** offer space for young people to get started themselves. **RADAR**[25] is one such place in Mechelen where young people can go for advice to develop their creative ideas into a full-fledged production. They can follow workshops or join an existing project. There are social and artistic supervisors. The scope of possibilities is very wide.

In Dordrecht[26], youth workers were looking for ways to reconnect with young people during the lockdown. Often, the remarkable

practice was **chatting during online games**. These were not in-depth conversations, but they did yield 'mental notes': 'that young person is really isolated', 'I have to talk to them about this or that', etc. Online gaming was not an end in itself but turned out to be a means to more confidential conversations.

OBSERVATIONS

This model provides the possibility to address a youth worker, supervisor or class coach. If young people are convinced that the coach respects them for who they are and also has something to offer, the chances of success increase. In that case, the coach is a catalyst. If the coach does not have those qualities, they will rather be an obstacle. As a professional coach, it is therefore of great importance to correctly assess the young people and to respond to them.

Sometimes the supervisor is strongly focused on the output. This might result in tensions. Purposefulness is important, also for young people. But if they realise that the process will be useless, the motivation disappears. However, if the result is not what the young people hoped for, the experience of the process is still valuable.

MODEL 3
PROFESSIONAL MODEL

EXAMPLES

This form has been extensively investigated within ORPHEUS.

Ceapire, for example, organises **M-talks** throughout Flanders[27]. The supervisor chooses themes based on what they think is going on. They usually do not know the young people but have the expertise to steer a dialogue on sensitive topics (relations with the police, for example) in the right direction. The methodology of a Socratic dialogue means that every opinion may be expressed, but that everyone is then challenged to critical reflection. Sometimes a guest speaker introduces the theme to broaden perspectives.

Revolt is a project of R-newt[28] in North Brabant and South Holland. The young people have a relationship with the supervisors, although there is room for newcomers. In a first meeting, everyone is allowed to give their opinion on the issue that has been introduced by young people (in recent years this concerns the space they get at school or in the public sphere) or by supervisors (the elections, for example). The young people help determine how they can delve into the subject (including by inviting an expert) and whether they want to proceed to social action.

Revolt was also copied and inspired Mechelen in **JOC ROJM**.[29] Initially with some suspicion young people participated out of respect for the professionals. It started with a free conversation between girls and boys aged 14 to 24. Both groups chose different themes, so it was agreed to create two lists and choose from them in turn. The ice broke quickly, and it was very enriching for them to be able to speak freely, even about matters that are otherwise perceived as inappropriate. They stimulated each other, and it was always chosen to invite an expert after an initial conversation to go deeper into the matter. The next step might have been writing an article or organising a public action but the participants didn't feel the necessity because they had the feeling that a lot had already been achieved, on the other hand because the courage was lacking to go public with it.

OBSERVATIONS

In order to tackle problems, professionals sometimes create the space for young people, so they might speak out and reflect on their grievances. If the group is familiar to them, young people can also add themes themselves and the Professional model therefore introduces an element of the Coaching model.

Usually the participating young people are known to the supervisors and they are also familiar with the 'house rules'. Other supervisors find it important to make some rules explicit before starting these types of conversations. For example, that everyone has the opportunity to express their opinion. Observations show that one approach, starting with or without rules, is not necessarily better than the other. The choice mainly depends on how well the group knows each other and what expertise the supervisor has.

In order to succeed, it is essential that young people have confidence in the guidance, in each other and in the safe space. That is only possible if they know that there will be respect for their opinions and recognition for their grievances.

MODEL 4
GOVERNANCE MODEL

EXAMPLES

In response to the wish of the Mechelen City Council to raise awareness among young people concerning forced marriages, VZW Ella was contacted to develop a project. [30] **KZUZ** ('k Zie U Zitten) started from the theme of identity in order to discuss marriage through relationships and sexuality. During three sessions, young people were given room to express themselves on these issues, to develop and articulate their ideas.

Supported by the international program **Peace in Our Cities** (PIOC),[31] 12 young people from Mechelen shared their experiences on social media with each other every week for two months. In conversations, they were challenged to reflect. In this way it became clear what they experience as threatening.

OBSERVATIONS

Unlike in previous models, the issue here is introduced by policy makers. Politicians feel a need or want to know what is going on. They often engage external (social) organisations for that assignment. The question remains how to make young people enthusiastic about the imposed topics. Especially when the target group consists of young people with frustrations, this is not evident.

When the same theme was discussed within other models, there was often more space, according to observations. If young people put something on the agenda, there is more enthusiasm.

PLEA FOR CUSTOMISATION

Based on the ORPHEUS' view on prevention, the intention was to experiment with forms of safe spaces that increase the control and agency of young people. If we take this seriously, the chance of success is greater. In prevention, control is good, but trust is better. In a trustworthy or confidential space young people can develop more of their talents and capabilities and learn from their mistakes. That means connecting, acknowledging who they are as a person and acknowledging their position in society. This is in stark contrast to the stereotypical framing of young people in vulnerable situations as victims or as criminals.

Moreover, ultimately this approach also benefits the security agenda, as we have explained with the prevention pyramid. The more fundamental prevention is (the lower in the pyramid), the more likely it is that purely reactive interventions can be avoided.

From this point of view, the best model is the one which gives young people responsibility throughout the process: from the issues to the location, the intensity, the duration and the choice of further actions. The **Self model** starts directly from grievances or issues that concern young people and how they find solutions, but the **Coaching model** can help ameliorate those insights and the activities that result from them and allow more impact. A problem might be that social change and prevention cannot be achieved without people and resources, which are usually part of policy. The **Professional model** gives opportunities to reconcile top-down and bottom-up. Although maximum responsibility is preferable in the entire process, in practice it is not always possible to give the freedom that is preferred. That is why customisation will remain appropriate.

This brings us to the role of the professional. In the Coaching and the Professional model, the success factor of the safe space and the involvement of young people is inextricably linked to the attitude of the supervisor. The central word in this has already been repeatedly used: **trust**. Without it, a safe space cannot exist.

A second element is **credibility**. In conversations, this proved to be an important connecting principle. A supervisor can listen to young people, but this attitude must above all be 'authentic'. If not, the supervisor will fall by the wayside. This requires knowledge and knowing where you stand. A supervisor who puts them self above the young people does not open doors, but a supervisor who pretends to stand next to the young people will be seen through in seconds.

In addition, listening to the participants should not be a form of sham participation. A supervisor may have an idea in advance of what young people want and need. This helps to guide the process in the moment but should not lead to pre-determined scenarios that need to be rolled out. To a certain extent, one must dare and be able to let go of the imposed results or end products the management or policy makers want . What matters most is the search for the **right supportive attitude** in a process that puts young people in the driver's seat.

In any case, the path that young people will take or choose remains unpredictable. By allowing this to be open, safe spaces facilitate that young people can make a valuable contribution in their own way, in their moment. In this way, safe spaces can support young people to become part of a democratic society as full citizens.

DISCUSSIEBOX

- Is it the intention to do something meaningful for young people? Or is it the intention to realise organisational or policy goals?
- How much space do you have to do something that meets the needs of young people? And if you're going to negotiate that space, have you really created more space, or does it just seem that way? And if you're short on space, do you run the risk of feeding grievances?
- Do you trust that young people can achieve a lot at their own pace and in their own way? Or maybe their initial and ultimate goals aren't exactly what third parties expect, but are you willing to provide that space?
- By whom and how is this safe space controlled and managed?
- If professionals are deployed, is this problem-oriented (management) or supportive?

4 FROM SAFE TO BRAVE

In many safe spaces – including the ORPHEUS pilot projects – young people were given the opportunity to have their say and express their grievances. This can be supportive, healing and strengthening. But mere venting does not offer a solution for the problems that they run into in everyday life. This requires more action in and towards the outside world.

This is not an obvious step for professionals. It is easier to refer young people who come up with problematic stories in confidence to specialised counsellors. Sometimes professionals use more silent or informal channels to address issues internally or higher. But raising the questions or problem definitions with the young people publicly and organising actions are seldom seen as core tasks by supervisors. Sometimes they are afraid of conflict, escalation and polarisation.

Nevertheless, this dimension is very important in ORPHEUS. The injustices that young people address in safe spaces are often not a problem of the young people themselves. It is also a structural aspect of society, be it exclusion or discrimination. It would be better to address these grievances collectively instead of individually. While it is not wrong to make young people more resilient to 'inevitable injustice' in society, it is better to stand up for structural changes. This is the step from safe to brave(r) spaces.

COLLECTIVISING GRIEVANCES

Are safe spaces in themselves of no use? Of course, they are. We already gave some arguments: creating an environment in which young people feel safe and comfortable, in which they learn skills such as raising their voice, standing up for themselves and discussing with respect the opinions of others and in which they become more resilient.

What happens among young people, 'behind closed doors', in the safe space, is what researchers call the **internal dimension** of safe spaces. Some researchers point to 'a space for empowerment'[32] or 'a space for constructive disagreement'. If the internal dimension is an end in itself, doors may sometimes be closed. It is important that they also open doors: the safe space as a springboard where young people build up enough self-confidence and take courage to … jump; the safe space as a starting point for challenging perceived injustices. [33] [34]

Internal versus external. The **external dimension** refers to throwing open the doors. The injustice that young people make public, the change they demand.

INTERNAL DIMENSION	EXTERNAL DIMENSION
Safe space	Brave Space
Shielded, safe	Unsafe
Comfort	Discomfort
'Equals' among ourselves: what do we want?	A world of inequality and injustice: how do we tackle this injustice?
The goal is to support and, give recognition, become aware, learn, share.	The goal is change-oriented: to make public, to politicise.

In order to challenge inequality in society and to realise change, there is a need for polyphony and attention to various perspectives and power relations. Society often restricts young people, but also encourages them to make their voices heard and to speak out. The role of supervisors is to take stories seriously and help young people look for ways to get started. This **external dimension** means leaving the safe space to work on and demand change to societal contexts.

An important condition is that supervisors are trusted by their colleagues, organisation and board. After all, they can find themselves in a difficult position when they support young people and their actions. Another danger is that brave spaces are instrumentalised by policymakers. For example, when the goal is to teach young people top-down values and norms on 'how to behave in society'. Instrumentalising practices in youth work for policy purposes is not new, but this does not fit in the concept of brave spaces. On the contrary, from an emancipatory view, 'brave spaces' might go in a completely different direction than the dominant idea that young people should adapt.

The external dimension is not new and sometimes has different names in the literature, depending on the research field. For example, 'The political class' by Hess and McAvoy[35] is a concept for bringing society and politics into education. It is conceived as a confined space, a laboratory for learning experiences with a freedom of expression that is impossible in the outside world. In addition, a closed safe space will always be a space that is connected with the outside world. It is a next step to go from a lab for the public debate (safe space) to making the debate with and by young people (brave space) public.

In social geography we find similar ideas in the concept of Edward Soja's 'Third Space'.[36] Soja refers to a First Space as the space in which people actually live. The Second Space is about our expectations about that space. Power and ideology influence how it is arranged and used. Finally, there is the Third Space where the focus lies on how people can tackle power relationships, or 'break down' as Soja calls it. It is a space that is meant to disrupt and deconstruct, and it is precisely this thought that is interesting in our context of brave spaces.

These concepts all start from the same model of society in which conflict and dissensus are seen as a natural and essential part of a vibrant democracy. Society is too divided to allow for a firm and broad consensus on the structure of society. Moreover, an imposed consensus covers up the inevitable contradictions. But there is an important challenge: these contradictions should not lead to an enmity between 'us' and 'them'. For political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, this is the difference between 'agonism' and 'antagonism'.[37] In a democratic society, it is important to change enmity into an agonistic conflict between legitimate adversaries. We must therefore work towards a shared democratic space where we can 'fight' each other as opponents in a non-violent way (agonism). Otherwise, contradictions become absolute and the 'enemies' are hated, attacked and destroyed (antagonism). Mouffe calls this an 'agonistic model of citizenship'. Social and cultural conflicts are seen as normal phenomena and must therefore be given the necessary space, both in the internal dimension and in the external dimension of safe spaces.

Based on this model of society, safe and brave spaces for young people can effectively be a preparation for participation in society. Laboratories where young people are in full control can experiment with changes in society, evolve to emancipatory places that offer a counterweight to the dominant view of young people that they just have to adapt.

HOW CAN SAFE SPACES EVOLVE INTO BRAVE(R) SPACES?

There are various ways to evolve from safe to 'braver' spaces. We give four, ranked from comfortable to more change-oriented.

METHOD 1
EXAMPLES THAT INSPIRE

Young people in the Brugse Poort in Ghent responded in 2020 with an **open Facebook letter**[38] against the approach to a drug problem and framing of their neighbourhood by the municipality. This inspired many other young people to speak out about how they want to see their neighbourhood. Sometime later, young people from Ledeberg in collaboration with VZW JONG and VZW Stappen made the documentary **ZONE(N)050**[39], their view and perspective on their 'problematic' neighbourhood'.

The most comfortable way is to take a look at other brave spaces, even at those groups where there is not an obvious common ground. Their indignation and engagement for action can be an inspiration to better understand their own position and to work with it in their own safe space. In this way, a mental shift can be made. Various emancipation movements inspired each other for centuries in their fight against injustice and discrimination.

METHOD 2
DEBATE TECHNIQUES IN THE SAFE SPACE

Earlier we mentioned the Antwerp organisation **Ceapire** that uses the Socratic dialogue method during offline and online safe spaces to discuss sensitive topics. For example, the theme 'finding your religious knowledge on the internet'. The activity is intended for Antwerp Muslim youth and discusses the danger and problems of seeking knowledge about the faith online. Several popular YouTube videos concerning supernatural things and exorcism are discussed. Through incisive questions, young people are challenged to reflect. If they find one video not very credible, why would the other clip be more trustworthy? The most important thing is not what final conclusion young people can reach, but that they take a critical stance in other situations.

Ceapire also developed '**alternarratives**', short videoclips on topics that young people themselves perceive as injustice. They are discussed in safe spaces. After all, Ceapire's experience is that young people are more likely to give their opinion on sensitive issues when they can respond to the views of other young people. Something like this lowers the threshold and is challenging at the same time. An example of an alternarrative might be a clip in which a speaker puts forward the point of view that Islamophobia is fueled by the behaviour of Muslims themselves, which would then be the starting point of a discussion.

Jon Nicolas, a trainer from the United Kingdom, organised **workshops with high school students** as part of ORPHEUS. He uses a mix of theatre and mediation techniques to teach groups experiencing tensions or challenges to discuss and argue. He starts with statements about seemingly trivial subjects: 'Cake is better than ice cream' or 'Pineapple and ham belong on pizza'. There is a lively debate that leads to the following important findings: (1) it is possible that different opinions can exist safely in the same room, (2) polarisation can occur around many topics and (3) this way of debating can also be used to steer a conversation about a more contentious identity issue in the right direction.

This form of brave space is about the active introduction of debate techniques in the safe space. They challenge young people to think more deeply about their views. Often, they find it difficult to admit errors in their reasoning, even when they have contradicted themselves. The intention is not to force young people to change their minds, because that can be detrimental to the feeling of security in the safe space. The intention is to let the young people grow in forming and expressing their opinion.

One of the results of the work within ORPHEUS is a 'train the trainer' bundle of methods to make professionals stronger in dealing with controversial issues within a group. This training offers a lot of inspiration to make safe spaces braver.

METHOD 3
INTRODUCING CONTRADICTION IN THE SAFE SPACE

The Antwerp organisation Bazzz regularly arranges **Meeting Points,**[40] discussion forums where young people discuss issues concerning identity and social issues in completely safe environment. These are safe practice moments where young people initially enter into a conversation with each other, to let external parties discuss the next time. The topics range from radicalisation and the impact of social media to gender equality and sexuality.

Also, at Safe Space VZW, they have a monthly **Youth Talk** with an invited speaker. [41] Everyone can give their opinion but there are rules: let each other speak, do not attack the speaker and do not start from the idea that one's own truth is the only right one. This is also a moment of practice and confrontation with alternative external opinions.

A step further is to introduce outsiders and other visions and arguments into the safe space. In this way, young people are challenged to go deeper into the subject topics, to formulate stronger arguments and be able to stand more firmly in the discussion, still in complete safety. It can also be an impetus to determine the right strategy for the next step: throwing open the doors of the safe space and coming out with an opinion or action. After all, one cannot just throw young people into the public debate. That could be harmful to them and to the issue they want to bring to attention.

Guiding these types of processes is not easy. That is why ORPHEUS in addition to the aforementioned 'train the trainer' developed other training courses on controversial issues, on strengthening social bonding and group bonding among young people, on dealing with expressions of youth and counterculture and on media literacy.

METHOD 4
GO PUBLIC

Jong Gent in Actie (JGIA) is a Ghent organisation working with young people in vulnerable situations. They regularly meet to discuss problems that young people experience. Then they decide together whether they want to go public on the issue. For example, there was a lot of dissatisfaction concerning their contacts with the Student Guidance Centre. Several young people had bad experiences and felt unfairly treated. The group decided to write a press release and request a meeting with the directors of the various Ghent SGCs. When the meeting was cancelled at the last moment, they went directly to the Alderwoman of Education, who summoned the directors to take up the invitation and start talking. In the meantime, the complaints procedure within the SGC is being reviewed.

In 2015, youth workers in Antwerp neighbourhoods picked up signals about negative perceptions by policymakers and more specifically about 'ethnic profiling' by the police. Eleven youth clubs gathered symbolically a hundred young people from various backgrounds and called it: **J100**. Their meetings were all about connecting, deepening the content, seeking and formulating solutions and working on action models. Youth workers facilitated the process, but the participating young people could determine and steer. During the first J100 summit in November 2016, young people were given the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with politicians and police. It was not an easy conversation, but the J100 found it of great importance to let police and young people talk to each other in a calm context. All too often this is not the case on the streets. In the meantime, J100 meetings take place regularly with 50 to 150 young people and there is an annual J100 summit with even more participants.

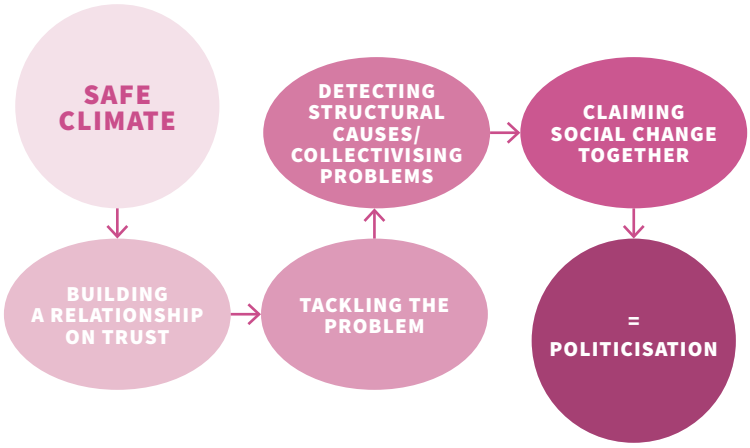
The final step towards a good space is to publicly stand up against injustice. It takes courage – hence the term 'brave' – to leave the safe space, step out and act in the public space. However, the spectrum of possible 'forms of action' is very broad: from accessible to high-threshold, offline or online, from 'making something visible' (for example with an exhibition, music or a theatre piece) via 'demanding change' (with an open letter, a petition, a demonstration, a boycott, etc.) to 'realising change' (rolling up your sleeves on a small scale to show that things can be done differently). Every step young people take to publicly make peers and involved people (friends, family, professionals, schools, policymakers) more aware of something that is at stake, is a success in itself. Yet young people often aspire quick success such as 'the police must stop issuing fines now' or 'discrimination must stop'. It is important to realise that these legitimate demands take time. Democratic processes are slow and not always measurable.

All these forms of action in the public space are examples of 'politicising practices'. Based on years of action research, Artevelde University of Applied Science, with the support of ORPHEUS, published the publication GET UP, STAND UP, a practical book full of examples of politicisation by young people.

Although we hear voices from the ORPHEUS pilot projects that the concept of brave spaces is very interesting, many professionals are still reluctant to support young people to go public and to stand up against injustice. That is why GET, UP STAND UP is also linked to a training for supervisors of young people.

A BRAVE SPACE MUST ALSO BE SAFE!

Brave spaces need a safe climate and a relationship of trust between young people and youth workers as an absolute condition for functioning. During the action research into politicisation in youth welfare work by Artevelde University of Applied Science this became very clear. That is why this scheme was developed together with youth workers:



Young people only share their grievances with the supervisors they trust and are only prepared to go public if there is basic safety in the group and if they know that the professionals really understand and support them. Without these foundations, they will not share what they experience and what they dream of. It is the task and role of the professional to pick up individual signs, to look for connections and – if young people want it – encourage them to set up politicising processes.

> “Equality goes hand in hand with trust. They must feel that we are fighting together. They must feel that we are going for it together, that we are allies!
>
> (SUPERVISOR JONG GENT IN ACTION)

The Norwegian researcher Haugstvedt also explicitly pointed out the importance of this basic setup in contexts where distrust, insecurity and polarisation are rampant. But working ‘in confidence’ with so-called at-risk youth is often viewed with suspicion by police officers and policymakers. An illustration of this is the testimony of Molenbeek youth workers who, after the attacks in 2016, not only had to fight to regain the lost trust of their young people, but also became suspects to the security services themselves.[42]

This completes the circle. Safe spaces can evolve to brave spaces. But brave spaces also need a safe climate.

DISCUSSION BOX

- Are there individual grievances that several young people experience? What do you do with that? Are these (individual) problems discussed in group sessions with young people? Why, why not?
- Where do you situate the practices in your organisation in the spectrum from safe to brave? Are you consciously working on this?
- What forms of ‘braveness’ do you have no experience with? Why is this? The target group? The mission of the organisation? Pressure from government services? The skills of professionals? The context in which the organisation sits?
- What space do you need in your organisation to organise more brave spaces? How can the organisation achieve this?
- How can you contribute to the public expression of grievances about injustice and do that together with young people (politicisation)? What are the arguments for doing/not doing this?
- How do you work in an emancipatory way with young people? What can you do as an organisation for young people with grievances?

CONCLUSION

Although a **safe space** was described at a very basic level in the application for the ORPHEUS project as 'a location with specific activities', it became clear from the start of the pilot projects that the reality is much more complex. It concerned not only the creation of a safe 'space', the **thinking** about it was also fascinating and challenging. Even though there is controversy around the concept and in the literature, the usefulness is obvious: safe spaces offer time and space for young people to reflect on their problematic experiences in a safe way through conversation or games and they offer them energy to stand firmer in a society that is constantly evolving.

An important feature of a safe space is the degree of **control** that young people get. There is no one sacred model and customisation is needed. But taking young people seriously is essential to prevent safe spaces from being instrumentalised. Unfortunately, youth workers and their organisations are often under pressure from prevention policies to achieve specific goals. That is why it was an important insight that the concept of safe space does not fit seamlessly with the concept of prevention. Working with imposed goals risks creating many tensions in the relationship of trust between supervisors and young people, while unpredictability is a logical and important consequence of a high degree of control for young people.

For youth workers, teachers and other professionals, supporting and guiding safe/brave spaces often brings **uncertainty and searching**. Many have poor experience with this aspect and have to learn to balance between the protective and the emancipatory dimension of pedagogical work with young people. Both overprotection and the opposite, relying too much on the responsibility of the young people themselves, are pitfalls. In order to succeed, the space must not only be safe for the young people, but also for the supervisors. This presupposes trust, backing and support from colleagues, management and organisation. This might not be evident for many projects with strict rules, goals and boundaries.

The **brave space concept also** received support from professionals in the pilot projects. But in the daily practices there was often reluctance. The perception of their own role, the lack of examples or experiences and the organisational culture set limits. There are few practices and methods that support professionals in this. Although there are more and more organisations searching for emancipatory methods and more and more organisations want to work collectively with the individual grievances of their young people. If that happens, safe spaces could become breeding grounds for emancipatory and politicising processes. Brave spaces in which young people claim their place as full citizens in a democratic society, as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

ENDNOTES

[1] This definition is the result of a combination of insights from (1) the **model of Hafez &Mullins** (2015) addressing the interplay of three (offline and online) risk factors for violent extremism by: strengthening positive networks for young people; providing legitimate channels for publicly expressing grievances; promoting inclusive alter-narratives about society and (2) **deklerck's integral prevention pyramid model** (2006) where we (safe spaces) are situated at the general level with a positive effect on fundamental prevention.

[2] Weyns,W. (2021). *Who what woke? A culturally critical approach to what we consider unjust.* Pelckmans.

[3] Arao, B. & Clemens, K. (2013). *From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice.* In L.M. Landreman, The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators (pp.135-150). Sterling, Virginia: Styles Publishing, LLC.

[4] Claeys, E., FLachet, T., Moustatine, A., De Backer, M., Collectief Bim (2019). *Radicalisation, Dark mirror of a vulnerable society.* Academia Press, pp. 101 et seq. in which young people and youth workers report on intense withdrawn conversation days in the Ardennes where they could give meaning to their experiences in a very safe space.

[5] Maly, I. (2018) *New right.* Antwerp, Epo Publishing House.

[6] See, among others, Willem Schinkel, *De Nieuwe Democratie* (2012) or Dirk Geldof (2006). *Well-being in the Service of Safety* (Sociaal.net).

[7] For more information, we refer to the evaluation report of Work Package 1 Offline Safe Spaces: https://www.orpheus-project.eu

[8] For this purpose, some tools were developed in ORPHEUS: https://www.orpheusproject.eu/en/toolkit/guide-me.

[9] The pressure and external control that youth workers or teachers experience is not so different to the feeling that young people who are also under pressure have, for example in public spaces. Moreover, organisations, schools and youth organisations will also face increasing pressure from subsidising bodies. That commonality does not necessarily have to be a problem but can unite. Whose side are you on?

[10] Sieckelinck, S. (2017) *Reradicalizing: Recruiting for a better world.* Lannoo Campus, Leuven, Belgium.

[11] Schinkel, W. (2009). *The new prevention. Actuarial archival systems and the new technology of security. Krisis, Journal of Contemporary Philosophy,* p. 3.

[12] For a comprehensive discussion of this, we refer to: Van Bouchaute, B., Vanhove, T., Görgöz, R., Debaene, R., Kerger, D. (2017). *Deradicalisation as a challenge to youth welfare work.* Ghent: Arteveldehogeschool. www.arteveldehogeschool.be/sites/default/files/projectfiche/syntheserapport_pwo_deradicalisering_als_uitdaging_voor_het_jeugdwelzijnswerk_-_definitief.pdf

[13] Ibidem.

[14] See Van Bouchaute B et al. (2017), o.c.

[15] The ORPHEUS prevention model is its own adaptation of Deklerck, J. (2006). *Tackling insecurity in an integrated way: the 'prevention pyramid'. Journal of Safety,* 5(3), 19-37.

[16] Fraser, N. (2005). *Reframing justice in a globalizing world.* New Left Review, 36, 69-88 & Fraser, N. (2008). *Abnormal justice. Critical Inquiry,* 34 (3), 393-422.

[17] Hafez, M. & Mullins, C. (2015). *The radicalisation puzzle: A theoretical synthesis of empirical approaches to home-grown extremism. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* 38, 958–975.

[18] Van Bouchaute, B. et al. (2017), o.c.

[19] Colaert, L. (Ed.) (2017). *'Deradicalisation.' Scientific insights for a Flemish policy.* Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.

[20] Kastit, I., & Henkens, N. (2017). It is not the task of youth work to watch over the safety of society. *Knack.*

[21] Sieckelinck, S. (2017) *Reradicalizing: Recruiting for a better world.* Lannoo Campus, Leuven, Belgium.

[22] Scheper-Hughes, N., & Bourgois, P. (Eds.) (2004). *Violence in war and peace.* Blackwell. With this anthology of studies of violence, the editors substantiate the thesis that people only resort to violence as a last resort.

[23] Www.capitalbelgium.be.

[24] Chaleff, I. (2009). *The Courageous Follower. Standing Up For & To Our Leaders.* (3d Ed.) Berrett-Koehler. Ira Chaleff continues to inspire youth work in paramilitary Northern Ireland and observes that leadership in social change fails without highly skilled support.

[25] www.radarmechelen.be
[26] www.r-newt.nl
[27] www.ceapire.be/safe-spaces#draaiboek
[28] www.r-newt.nl
[29] www.rojm.be
[30] www.ellavzw.be
[31] www.stanleycenter.org/publications/peace-in-our-cities
[32] Clark-Parsons, R. (2017). *Building a digital Girl Army: The cultivation of feminist safe spaces online.* New Media & Society, 20(6), 2125–2144; The Roestone Collective. (2014). *Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization.* Antipode, 46(5), 1346–1365.
[33] Lewis, R., Sharp, E., Remnant, J. & Redpath, R. (2015). *'Safe Spaces': Experiences of Feminist Women-Only Space.* Sociological Research Online, 20(4), 105–118.
[34] Khan, H.H., Adriaensens, I., Schuermans Hotels, T., Cools, J. (2021) *Safe Spaces are necessary but not a panacea,* https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/safe-spaces-zijn-noodzakelijk-maar-geen-wondermiddel
[35] Hess, D. & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom. Evidence and ethics in democratic education,* New York/London: Routledge. www.thepoliticalclassroom.com
[36] Soja, E.W. (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places.* Maiden, MA: Blackwell.
[37] This thinking about agonistic citizenship in which we embrace contradictions as a characteristic of a vital democracy without fighting each other as enemies, is based on the Belgian political philosopher Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political.* London: Routledge; Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically.* London: Verso Books.
[38] https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200503_04943328
[39] www.zonen050.com
[40] www.jcbazzz.be/meetingpoints
[41] www.safespacevzw.be/youth-talk
[42] See note 4.

Interreg 2 Seas Mers Zeeën ORPHEUS
European Regional Development Fund

The ORPHEUS project aims to experiment with alternative forms of (offline and online) prevention of violent extremism among young people.

Central to this approach are safe spaces, in which young people work on themes that concern them and are supported in expressing grievances. They are designed in such a way that they enable professionals to work positively and, instead of reacting repressively, to offer pedagogical support.

On the one hand, they are confined spaces where a lab is set up for learning experiences, with a freedom of expression that is not always possible in the outside world. On the other hand, these safe spaces are also connected to the outside world. In that sense, the lab is never completely closed. All conflicts in society can just pop up in the safe space and young people get to work with them.

From those labs, it is a small step to make those grievances public in practices of politicisation with and by young people.

The project develops offline and online safe spaces for and with young people. There are videos and a training developed for them. For supervisors, training courses have also been developed on strengthening security in safe spaces, dealing with controversial issues, online literacy and cybercrime, youth culture and politicisation.

This practical book is linked to extra online material for supervisors and a manual for their trainers.

MORE INFO

www ORPHEUSPROJECT.EU

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