

From Holocaust Denial to a Personal Family Tableau: „Narrative Group Work“

How to apply Group Analysis in Schools to Support Democratic Skills Europe-wide¹

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1 The social impact of group analysis

Group analysis was always intended to be more than just therapy. Rather, it was meant to have a societal impact, helping to promote liberal, democratic societies and support their resilience. In today's world, where democracies have come under enormous pressure from polarization, group-based hostility, conspiracy narratives, so-called violent extremism, and are also being undermined by parts of their own economic and political elites, group analysis can be applied as a much needed form of "intensified civic education" for the younger generations (Weilnböck, 2019). A practical implementation of group analysis' intent to have sustainable social and educational impact is now available as pedagogical method – Narrative Group Work. It was developed as a means of nonformal civic education in schools and youth institutions (Weilnböck, 2019; Cultures Interactive e.V., 2020). The current project focus is on rural and small-town habitats, its intention also being preventing young people from slipping into right-wing extremist social milieus.

2 The application in schools and civic education

In talking with teachers and colleagues in civic education, it is actually not that difficult to explain the goals and principles of process-open group work, rather than that of "group analysis". These happen to coincide with many of the educational objectives laid down in most schools' „framework curricula“. Thus, for example, narrative group work can promote important social and emotional competencies of students, their language education benefitting likewise. After all, group work is dedicated to the essential psychosocial - and pre-political - skill of having an engaged interpersonal conversation in the first place. This means active listening to one another and paying as much unbiased attention as possible - and doing so with different people or in situations of equal diversity and open group conversation.

¹ The Narrative Group Work approach is currently further developed in the Horizon Europe project "OppAttune", coordinated by The Open University (cf. bibliography). This article is an English translation of Weilnböck 2021.

What is also immediately convincing for experienced educators and teachers is the fact that in such a group conversation, above all, narrative skills can and should be developed. This is done by encouraging and enabling the students to talk about smaller or larger personal experiences, i.e., to share their own experiences and listen to those of the others. For, these experiences and subjective perceptions are the experiential background of our views and opinions, which, taken on their own, often lead us very quickly into heated arguments and escalate fruitlessly, especially when so-called extremist views are held. If, however, students are given a space in which they can calmly be aware of each other's experiences, views, and circumstances they will also learn to be more honest with each other and with themselves. They will also learn to be closer to their own feelings, experiences, also to their insecurities - and to negotiate disagreements free of developing personal resentment or of denigrating others. These skills will effectively prepare students to reach across rifts of personal tension and social polarization to engage in conversation even with those who seem furthest removed from their own social milieu and opinion. Narrative skills and social-emotional agency in a diverse, democratic society are mutually dependent.

It is, however, indispensable that the students find and develop the issues of their conversations completely independently - and that no agenda and no thematic controls or taboos, no matter how subtle, have an effect. Furthermore, they should be accompanied by facilitators from outside the school who can guarantee confidentiality as they are not otherwise involved in the students' school matters. These facilitators deliberately limit the opening of the group conversation to a cordial "So, how's it going?", "What moves you, here at school or beyond?"; or: "What would you like to talk about here?"; or else: "We are here to provide you with an open space, so you can talk among yourselves within the school!" Experience has shown that despite the complete thematic openness, or precisely because of it, students naturally end up talking about experiences and issues which touch upon current socio-political topics and questions of social interaction (e.g. prejudice, homophobia/sexism, bullying/ hate speech, regional right-wing populism/ extremism, etc.). Optionally, these topics can then also be taken up by teachers in related classes, while the specifically personal contexts of how the topics came up in the group remain anonymous, as a matter of course. In this way, the basic social and communicational skills among students are strengthened, as are their democratic convictions - and their passion to talk, share and connect socially - thus, at the same time, also preventing and intervening against anti-democratic and anti-human rights attitudes in and around the school.

3 Setting and methodology

In practice, narrative group work, which takes place over the course of one to two school semesters in one hour per week works with an existing class, from which two groups of about nine to thirteen students are formed spontaneously. The schools make time available for this during regular school hours in different ways, e.g. utilizing the hours of social, language or creative school subjects. Each group of students is accompanied by two group facilitators into separate rooms. These are preferably of mixed gender and socio-culturally diverse make-up (e.g. with regard to migration background), so that temporary group divisions into two smaller sub-groups can be used all the more effectively. These sub-groups may be formed spontaneously for a variety of reasons, whereby the dividing line may be based on gender, other social criteria, or group dynamic tension lines that have arisen. As an additional setting variable, a time-out room with a fifth facilitator is provided, in which individual students can temporarily withdraw if necessary or to which they can be temporarily invited in case the protection and support of the group conversation requires so.

Due to the circumstances of the project, the group facilitators are recruited rather on an ad-hoc basis, those being civic educators and social workers. They can only be trained to a comparatively small extent by conveying to them some techniques of narrative dialogue facilitation, active listening and the very basics of dealing with group dynamics. On a more technical level, the participants then practice, for example, how to effectively ask narrative questions – such as How-questions: "How was the situation like exactly?", "How did it happen exactly that ...?", "Can you remember another experience that was similar/very different? How was it?" – and by all means avoiding Why-questions. The most important overarching element of this training, however, is that it supports the future facilitators of narrative group work at schools in putting aside the usual patterns of (counter-)arguing and discussing which we have internalized from our omnipresent culture of debate and from civic education – and in cultivating an attitude of establishing relationships and joint narrative exploration.

Those schools interested are usually found through school social work and committed school principles or through knowledgeable persons in the state ministries of education and schooling, whom we contact as framework partner NGO within the federal program "Live Democracy!" for strengthening democracy. Cultures Interactive (NGO) is a non-profit association which has been active for 20 years in so-called model-projects for the prevention of right-wing extremism, primarily in Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe, utilizing youth culture workshops, civic education and group work in varying innovative combinations. The colleagues in our field are predominantly civic educators and social workers, and more

recently increasingly also (systemic) counsellors. Only the project lead is trained in group analysis.

We offer the teaching staff of the schools an information event and, if they are interested and if the project budget allows, further training of our methodology. The setting of the narrative conversation groups² described above has three important interfaces, one being subject teaching in the class room (as already mentioned), another being municipal youth and family welfare services, which may also provide targeted measures of so-called deradicalisation or other forms of psychosocial interventions (e.g. mental health, prevention of suicide, violence/sexual assault, drug abuse etc.) since the demand may become evident during group work with the students; the third interface being school counselling in case systemic issues of the particular school emerge, as systemic mobbing and so-called extremism or otherwise inappropriate behaviour among teachers.

This interagency cooperation along certain interfaces of the group work setting intends to further sustainable impact especially in rural schools with high needs for prevention of right-wing extremism and group focussed hatred (cf. 'Group Based Enmity'). In the middle term the objective is to inspire ministerial education policies to the effect that narrative group work, serviced by independent NGO practitioners, can become a solid element of the state school education system – a special focus and European education policies.

4 Reconstruction of consecutive group work sessions with students

4.1 Saying the Unspeakable I - Holocaust Denial

The dynamics of a particularly impressive sequence of two sessions of such a narrative conversation group may well illustrate the potential of this method of intensified civic education. In a group at a rural high school in Eastern Germany close to the Polish border, which interacted in a comparatively prosocial, open-hearted and consensual manner, the 15-year-old students opened up personally so quickly and to such an extent that, as early as the third session, they also made some hints and statements about their political attitudes and those of their families and village communities. This probably was not easy for them, as in some of their communities of origin the extreme right-wing populist party AfD (Alternative for Germany) experiences an approval rating of over two-thirds of the population. Furthermore, in some of the groups in this school there were indications of connection to right-wing

² For further explanation of the setting, see in German language the "Evaluation Report" on the project page (cf. Weilnböck, 2019).

extremist and vigilant milieus ("Reichsbürger"), some students carried concealed iron swastikas, and questions of illegal gun ownership in the families became a topic. The group facilitators (from an independent, outside of school NGO) had previously assured the students in their groups on various occasions of the fundamental confidentiality of all that is said in the group. In the course of the continuous relationship-building process, the students developed increasing confidence in the open and unbiased space of group work, the reliability of the facilitators and also amongst the students of their own group (which constitute half of their class).

For example, a 15-year-old took advantage of the third weekly session to provocatively relativize the Holocaust with a tone of conviction and without any apparent immediate reason. He stated very emphatically that "the Holocaust wasn't that bad after all"; that "there weren't that many by far" and that "the Jews had always been persecuted"; but that "Germany was so technically advanced"; "... We had the gas chambers ... and someone had to do it anyway"; and that "now only Germany has to bear the brunt for it" and "is forever being reproached". "And besides, what about the German prisoners of war in Russia? That was 270,000, of which only 5000-6000 came back, ask yourself why that was! ... But you're not allowed to talk about such things at school anyway." Whereupon the young man prepared to instruct the group on his cell phone where all this and much more could be read on "forbidden websites".

This relatively abrupt, drastic statement was certainly to be understood in this group also as an attempt by the 15-year-old to underpin his social status and to continue to test the group facilitators of their trustworthiness and composure. However, the views expressed were recognizably also what the young man and a significant part of his family-like village environment authentically thought and said. In any case, this gave the group facilitators a welcome opportunity to enter into direct personal conversation and relationship by means of narrative dialogue questions about what is also a central topic of historical and civic education – and to further deepen their previous work with the group. Therefore, they did not focus on contradicting or rebuking the young man at this point in time by presenting the historical facts and taking a specific position, as is usually the impulse and procedure of civic education in such situations. The fact that the boy's assertions are factually wrong and also punishable by law in Germany and that they themselves do, of course, not hold this view was mentioned by the group facilitators here rather in a by the way fashion, depending on the personal style and need for clarification on the side of the respective facilitator. Nor did this group leave the slightest doubt as to what attitude the team, which had come from a metropolitan – supposedly leftist – area, would have on questions of German history.

Instead, the group facilitators firstly expressed their fundamental respect and appreciation for the openness with which the boy expressed himself – and then successively and carefully made an effort to explore the individual and social background of this statement, together with the group. Young people usually find such exploring very exciting and like to actively engage in it. An initial question as to whether he often confronts those around him with this or similar statements, signalled the facilitators' intent to build closer contact with him – but at this point in time only led to the boy underlining the factual seriousness of his statement. This was perhaps because he was not yet able to understand the question as an invitation to narrative personal storytelling. The group facilitators' way of moderating the conversation then followed the guideline: "By the way, I don't agree with you about the Holocaust, (which you probably already thought yourself). But tell me how you got to this – and also more broadly who you actually are as a person? ... Do you often have conversations about these topics? ... What moves you on this? ... Tell us a little bit about the people you mix with – and also those who tell you these things? ... What else do you experience with them? Do you ever have disputes with them? Do you sometimes have questions? What do you usually experience when you say things like that in school?" and other narrative dialogue questions. This attitude of narrative interaction follows the basic pattern of "No!-but-Yes,-do-tell-me-more-about-it!"; that is, it leads away from the level of opinions, views, arguments and also facts, and tries to approach the level of individual experience, memory, biography, also personal emotions and motivations.

However, in this session, the young man did not seem to want to get involved yet – and with this behaviour proved to be in keeping with those other students of the school in another group who showed similar right-wing extremist attitudes (carrying concealed iron swastikas on them) and displayed rather obstructive and oppressive behaviour (cf. Weimböck, 2020). For this reason, the facilitators took measures as early as possible to involve the group as a whole, to pick up on the polarization and emotionalization which was caused – and most likely intended – by the boy's provocative statement, and lead the group conversation in a direction that allowed for the narrative dialogue and sharing of personal experiences. This proved to be hardly necessary, as this comparatively trusting group brought itself into play quite quickly and was supported by the facilitators with appropriate questions: "What can you others say about this?", whereby primarily the level of personal experience and observation is addressed and lesser so the level of opinion and arguments: "How do you others feel about these statements? What relating personal experiences can you think of? Where else do you encounter such situations/topics? What happens in these situations? How do they unfold? Which people are involved? What do you experience with them?" etc.

In this, a series of short, often simultaneously and overlappingly spoken contributions took place, which offered various possibilities for further deepening through narrative inquiries. Two students demarcated themselves immediately, naming the technical term "Holocaust denial" themselves, thus indicating a certain adeptness in discourses of civic education. Another boy seemed to want to partly distance himself from the 15-year-old's statement, but explicitly concurred that "you can't talk about all this in school." Another told the facilitators that such statements were often heard in the area, which provided further opportunities to garner new relating experiences – reported from the community. Two other students attempted to mediate on behalf of the boy, commenting how "he was like" and that this should be understood in a personal level ("That's just his thing"). The boy himself then responded intermittently and affirmed some assessments, which indicated the relatively high degree of personal relationship, understanding and communality in this group/ class, across different fractions. In fact, one or two similar situations when the boy had acted out in this way were specifically alluded to, which offered further opportunities for experiential deepening – especially since one situation had implied a public display of the Hitler salute which then had serious consequences for the young man.

This self-motivated, group-dynamic conversation alone – which the group engaged in with the help of the external facilitators in a confidential space on this politically explosive topic and about their confrontational classmate – may already be deemed immensely valuable in pedagogical respect. For, such conversational space will easily evolve into exploring other experiences, memories and reflections relating to local right-wing extremist subcultures – which could then be built on pedagogically in various ways and on different levels of schooling. Furthermore, such sequences of a narratively oriented group conversation support the students' conversational, social and reflective skills as well as their skills of interacting in groups and their level of emotional intelligence. Consequently, in this and later sessions of this group, the topic of right-wing extremism in the region and in some of the students' families was addressed from an increasingly personal perspective – which is only possible in a safe and confidential space in which this historical topic is not brought to the students top-down through a planned teaching unit as part of an educational agenda.

4.2 How to Save and Strengthen Future Civic Education

To begin with, it is important to underline what the narrative group work setting has achieved here, already in one of the first sessions of this group: It succeeded in avoiding a frequently occurring and tragic failure of civic education. Because this shocking – and of course condemnable – statement of the young man is generally viewed as the worst-case-scenario of

civic education; which it is really not, depending on how one looks upon it and which setting one has put in place. However, the general view of civic education is: Here absolutely unacceptable and unspeakable things were said; and the ethos of the profession thus demands that this must be avoided and refuted by all means. Therefore the young man must be corrected, even sanctioned and “put in his place”; civic education, as it were, needs to cracked down on this – and the statement must be entirely annulled at all cost.

Some civic educators even feel anxious that – if not intervening restrictively and with maximum impact – they may violate the unalienable standards of pedagogical practice under penalty of professional excommunication. In fact, the fear of being bitterly reproached that one has not been strict enough vis-à-vis such youngsters and their statements seems to be quite strong in the professional community in Germany due to a somewhat polarized, decade-long controversy about the so-called “accepting approach in youth work” (“akzeptierender Ansatz”). Moreover, it is held that if such statement is not immediately confronted and revoked this would unfailingly result in strengthening right-wing extremist propaganda – hence the view of a presumptive worst-case-scenario: Civic education being turned around in its opposite, i.e. into extremist propaganda. This fear is understandable in various respects; after all the young man even proceeds to share “forbidden web pages” in the group (which, however, he has probably been doing all the time in his class, school and beyond anyway).

But in what sense may this stringent crack-down on the unacceptable, right-wing extremist statement be a tragic and frequently occurring failure of civic education, as has been claimed above? Through strictly correcting the statement at all cost and sanctioning the 15-year old boy by “putting him in his place”, the group work practitioners would instantly and inevitably lose the trust of and contact with precisely those young people with whom we most urgently need to stay in personal and pedagogical contact with – because we are about to lose them as future citizens of our liberal and human-rights-based, democratic society.³ In fact, they would not only risk losing the 15-year-old boy in question but to a certain extent also put at risk the trust, respect and openness of the entire group. Because some of the group understandably say “that’s just his thing” – and they more or less like their fellow student, which is in and of itself not a bad thing within a diverse and dynamic group; and another young man who

³ This is not to say that in conventional settings of civic education and, above all, in semi-public situations of teaching/ education it would not at least be partly necessary to clearly refute such statements. Also one key concern of narrative group work, of course, always is to first check with and take care of those who may suffer and/or have been victimized by any such inappropriate and provocative statements in this group.

distanced himself from the statement said: "But at school you're not allowed to talk about that kind of thing anyway."

Hence, in this particular situation and through the setting of narrative group work the team succeeded in avoiding this tragic and frequently occurring break down of civic education – and, in fact, it became possible to turn around the situation quite positively in the end without strict corrections, sanctions etc. but rather by viewing what at first may have seemed to be a worst-case-scenario of civic education to be quite the contrary – a most promising opportunity. How was this possible?

During the first sessions, the group, with the help of the external facilitators, has effectively elicited their status quo in terms of Holocaust awareness as well as associated topics and personal experiences. These were all addressed with surprising openness. This already constituted a significant success of the work, especially since experience shows that already in such early moments the first processes of psycho-emotional reflection and change of attitude begin to set in with the students in an imperceptible manner. A further intensification of these processes can now be initiated in many ways through the above-mentioned techniques of asking narrative dialogue questions (see above: "Are there comparable situations/ experiences?", "Which people are involved?", "What else do you experience with them?", "What do the teachers say?" etc.). For each of these questions would lead to exchange of personal experiences, observations, and reflections on this highly relevant issue of community live and democratic politics, that would otherwise hardly occur in school, neither in class nor in informal student conversations.

Towards the end of this session, however, one of the facilitators decides to go one step further and ask a different kind of narrative dialogue question which addresses the young man more directly and personally: "I am very interested in what you said about the Holocaust. However, when I listen to how you talk about this topic, I wonder first and foremost whether you are possibly a cruel person. What do you think? Is that so? ... Can you maybe describe a situation from your life to me where you would say, yes, that's where I was cruel – and sometimes I am a cruel person?" And because the end of the hour was already near, the facilitators opened up this question to the entire group, presenting it as homework for the week: "Why don't you all think about this until next week, ... i.e. whether you have ever said things similar to your classmate about the time of National Socialism or similar issues ... or heard them – and also, regardless of this, whether you think you are sometimes cruel and what situations there might be connected to it to talk about!"

4.3 The Unspeakable II - The Family Tableau Behind Holocaust Denial

In the follow-up session, it became apparent that some of the students had actually taken the weekly task seriously, which is not always a given. There were also indications that the students had since conversed about the issues from the group session in their informal contacts (recess breaks, in-between times, outside of school as well) and had also discussed the weekly homework. In any case, the 15-year-old and two classmates reported at the beginning of the session that they had thought about it and had come to the conclusion that they were not cruel. They could not remember any such situations. What struck them, however, was that they probably did not have "many strong feelings anyway", but were sometimes rather "callous".

Moreover, there was a very big shift in the general quality of the group conversation, both thematically and in terms of mood and atmosphere, compared to the last session. The latter had a predominantly provocative and boisterous character – up to the point that the 15-year-old wanted to show the "forbidden websites" (which, of course, was prevented by clarifying that everything could be said in narrative conversation groups, but nothing illegal should be done). In contrast, the follow-up session, in which the young people came back with observations about the topic of cruelty, was rather contemplative. To the facilitators' surprise, much was said about death and dying – and also some about being sad – without it being initially apparent how these topics had come up in the group (which, however, did unconsciously correspond to the topics of the Holocaust and cruelty, especially since they had triggered the homework). Thus, the group talked about various experiences of death within families, but also about the death of animals, whether on the farms or of pets. It was apparent that meaningful informal conversations among the students had preceded the group session.

This course of open conversation, mainly taking place within a self-determined group dynamic, then suddenly arrived at a very remarkable statement which was made by the 15-year-old who had previously denied the Holocaust in an obvious right-wing extremist manner – from which the question of cruelty had arisen to begin with. After the group had surprisingly quickly grasped and adopted the mode of narrative, storytelling communication (which is often the case with young people) and the group conversation had evolved to speaking about death and sadness, the 15-year-old now talked about what it was like when his paternal grandmother died, who had lived with the family in his parents' farm house in the local village. His father had "not winced at all about it" and had "gone about his ways quite normally the following day and swept the yard." The boy mentioned this in the regards to the topic of insensitivity/ callousness which was introduced by him and two classmates – and thus as response to the weekly homework (which had originated from his Holocaust denial). From this

narrative, however, he moved on to a very sober, yet shattering observation: He said that he was "deeply convinced that his parents would not be sad if he died".

In this moment of the group process the young man, surrounded by half of his classmates, came to the point where, in an outwardly relatively unaffected but very serious manner, he presented a personal assessment that was actually unbelievably sad, in that he assumed that his parents would probably not be sad about his death. These are thoughts that the teenager had presumably never testified to before and possibly had not even been aware of with any great clarity. Hence, this personal observation had been enabled and facilitated by a group process that had developed over only three sessions (but also the numerous informal intermittent moments the classmates spend together on a daily basis). The first culmination of this process was the striking denial of the Holocaust, which the facilitators made space for in an entirely unagitated and self-assured manner and with which the boy probably also tested the trustworthiness of the setting, completely unknown to him. This led to an engaged and sincere group conversation about the topic of the Holocaust – and to the question of possible personal cruelty on the part of the young man as well as of other students, then leading to the weekly task of reflecting on cruelty. Some students' observation about moments of one's own emotional insensitivity followed, bringing to light the memories of moments of callousness on the part of parents, especially towards the topics of death and dying. A general conversation about death, dying, and callousness ensued within the group at this point, leading the young man to assume his parents would not regret his death. The starting point was, as said, a moment of Holocaust denial.

The fact that it was possible to talk openly and confidently about all these thoughts, experiences, feelings and views (especially in an institution of which it was said that one was "not allowed to talk about such things here anyway") was of great value for the personality and skills development of each and every young individual in the group. Furthermore, the school's curriculum objectives regarding intellectual, emotional and social competence were maximally fulfilled here, while the issues touched upon are also relevant to the concrete curricular content of subjects such as history and civic education. Hence specialized lessons dealing with the Holocaust and Holocaust denial or a regional history project can easily be linked thematically.

Also in the group work setting itself in which historical teaching should not take place, the pedagogical effect of this situation can be deepened in many ways by the facilitators. For one, facilitators will certainly use the opportunity to signal their empathetic presence as attentive and solidary human beings: "Oh, I'm sorry about your parents. That certainly wouldn't feel good to have those thoughts." This may be followed by further questions or comments and

experiences from the young man or the other young people in the group. More detailed reflections may be prompted by remarks such as, "somehow, I'm not so surprised now that you sometimes say things that are so cruel and don't seem to notice."

Of course, an authentic civic educator and group facilitator can also just say more directly what he or she might spontaneously think: "I just had the idea that maybe you say all these rather right-wing extremist and cruel things because there is this thing of 'insensitivity' with you, some of your classmates and with your parents. – Has anyone else here experienced anything similar or has relating thoughts?" Further: "And as far as cruelty and right-wing extremism is concerned, there is quite a bit of it at this school and here in the region, which we have heard of in the meantime. Do you want to tell us more about it?"

If the group or individuals intuitively succeed in recognizing some of the psychological connections between cruelty, 'insensitivity', Holocaust denial, certain family dynamics, and political issues of the region and regional history (as regional right-wing extremism, assaults by cruel fathers, emotional underprovision of children/sons etc.) – one should never underestimate students in their intuitive psychological intelligence! – then the pedagogical effectiveness of this series of weekly group conversation would be maximally enhanced.

In any case, it hardly comes as a surprise that the topic of cruelty came up again and again later on in group sessions – and also in cautious conversations about some fathers "who are right-wing" and occasionally also cruel.

5 Advocating Narrative Group Work in School to be included into governmental education policies

From the perspective of civic education and the prevention of so-called extremism, it can be assumed that the greatest possible impact was achieved with this group, being made up of young people from a milieu- and family-based right-wing extremist environment. This may be especially true for the 15-year-old of whom one may justifiably hope, despite his environment, he might no longer resort to patterns of Holocaust denial so easily or at all in the future. In any event, he along with the group of his classmates around him, will presumably always remember the conversations about cruelty, Holocaust denial, insensitivity, and his presumption about his parents and family.

In the overall group-analytical view of these two sessions, it can be stated within reason, that one moment of saying the presumably unspeakable seemed to have led to the other – i.e. Holocaust denial on the one hand and the recognition of insensitivity and callousness in one's

own family and oneself on the other. This resulted in a highly effective pedagogical process, which in principle also holds the potential of giving a psycho-social impulse to the community and the region as such. One would not have been possible without the other though. With regard to the methodology of civic education one may conclude: Those not willing to allow saying the unspeakable because of political considerations and fears, must know that they will have to sacrifice the possibility of any such profound social-therapeutic effect.

Furthermore, we can draw the important conclusion that in our responsibility towards young people, the generation to come and the school education put in place to raise them, we are well advised to provide such safe spaces of maximum expressiveness, free talk, impartiality and openness to divers (group) relationships, in which young people can express and explore everything that moves them. This seems especially relevant for regions and social milieus burdened with (right-wing) extremists and similarly anti-democratic and anti-human-rights attitudes. For, the unspeakable in each case obviously always wants and needs to be said – be it the unspeakable in the sense of being brazen, provocative, politically shocking or be it the unspeakable in the sense of being not entirely conscious or personally-not-yet-sayable. If, however, no space for exploring and saying the unspeakable is provided, education and personality development will tend to falter and things may easily move towards the "cruel" and extremist.

The intensified pedagogical method of narrative group work is one possible way to make things sayable and thus support education and public schooling. What has yet to happen though, on national and European scales, is that state education ministries adopt such methods of intensified civic education, provided by independent NGO practitioners, into the standard curriculum of schooling – as a successful combination of formal and non-formal education. The NGOs providing the non-formal education element should thereby work in cooperation with a university of applied sciences for education and social work that could provide the framework for facilitator training and quality management. From this would result a sustainable framework of civic education in schools – which would be able and effective in safeguard liberal and resilient democracies in times of increasing polarization and loss of political trust.

At a Glance:

School education systems need a fundamentally new pedagogical element to support students from all social milieus in developing their capacity of 'doing democracy' and practicing human

rights. Current anti-democratic and so-called 'extremist' subcultures among young people underscore this necessity.

A group-analytically oriented setting – such as the 'narrative group work at schools' setting – can serve as this new, intensive-pedagogical element. For, here the often underestimated basic relational and democratic skills can be trained, ...

... to lead a respectful, engaged and trusting conversation with each other,

... to share, communicate, listen to and process personal experiences,

... to do this in group situations that are completely open in their topics and results, together with various other young people,

... to become fully attentive to each other and themselves in the group and to enter into a dynamic group relationship,

... to practice honesty with each other and with themselves,

... to better deal with one's own feelings and insecurities as well as with the feelings and insecurities of others,

... to navigate conflicts and negotiate disagreements free of bias, resentment and devaluing others.

A vibrant and resilient democratic society needs these skills in order for their citizens to remain in contact and keep up the social discourse across all divides and polarization.

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