

How can “extremist oppositional” worldviews be “attuned”? – Narrative Group Work in Schools® – an approach to learning to become a democrat

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Our approach of Narrative Group Work in Schools® is based on the assumption that successful living and acting in democratic societies – and contributing to the vitality and resilience of these societies – is based on the essential ability to talk to each other, in all kinds of constellations, about all kinds of issues, and especially in situations that are personally and/or politically challenging. This skill – talking to each other – is not a given; it must be learned early and maintained throughout life. In schools, this should be done through approaches such as Narrative Group Work®.

In Narrative Group Work® we invite school students to engage in open conversations within a safe space during schooltime, with independent facilitators and guarantees of confidentiality. We underline that this is parallel to social, language and creative subjects, and not only totally different from, but equally important as, taught lessons.

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For one hour per week, during at least one school semester, narrative dialogue groups involve existing classes, from which up to four smaller sub-groups are formed, each with its own room, facilitated by five NGO practitioners.

Preferably these practitioners are of mixed gender and from socio-culturally diverse backgrounds, so that sub-groups may be formed spontaneously, reflecting gender or other social criteria, or indeed group dynamics. A fifth time-out room with a further facilitator is on hand, so students can withdraw temporarily as necessary, or to protect the group conversation.

Facilitators are trained to moderate open-process, narrative group conversations in which only the students in their group determine the topics on which they share, thus suspending external controls. Instead, facilitators focus on narrative dialogue, encouraging and enabling students to talk about individual experiences, sharing their own personal observations and listening to others.

Such subjective perceptions are the experiential background of more political views and opinions, which, taken on their own, can lead us quickly into heated arguments and fruitless

rhetorical escalation. 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 understanding and honest with each other and with themselves.

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Narrative Dialogue groups can and should also be places where students share their experiences and fascinations with all kinds of anti-democratic movements, as well as deeply personal issues. A sensitive and heart-warming conversation about what it is like to flirt – and do so in a trans-gender constellation – can suddenly have a pro-Hitler comment from a 14-year-old girl with multiple family challenges.

Such an educational approach can be especially valuable for students who have been alienated from, or who have never experienced, democratic and human rights-based dialogue and ways of life; these are students we urgently need to win back, and here it is important to insist on narrative dialogue – rather than argument and debate.

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Methodologically, Narrative Group Work® is based on proven principles of narrative interviewing and self-awareness group sessions known from social therapy. Flexible group divisions and a staffed time-out area ensure effectiveness and sustainability of the process. An interface with youth welfare interventions, such as deradicalization/exit work services, as well as with the school curriculum supports the impact of civic education. The overarching perspective is to foster "emotional political intelligence" and democratic resilience, especially among hard-to-reach youth, susceptible to violent extremism.

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A recent case study provides an analysis of a group session in which a brazen denial of the Holocaust emerged, illustrating both the methodology and the potential of NGW. The group process quickly opened up and largely resolved issues of village, family, and individual distress that lay behind these statements.