

## **Narrative Group Work in Schools®**

– an OppAttune method of enhancing social dialogue and diminishing non-conductive oppositional action

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The method of facilitating social dialogue with 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 and may require mediation and attunement. This ability – to talk to each other – is not a given; it has to be learned early, already in schools, and maintained throughout life, individually and socially, through a democratic and human rights-based culture of social dialogue, in which a society talks to itself, so to speak.

Methodologically, Narrative Group Work® (NGW) is based on proven principles of narrative, biographical interviewing and self-awareness group sessions from social therapy. By talking about individual experiences and relevant issues from a personal point of view, NGW through dialogue groups strengthens young people's ability to build trust and relationships and to engage in respectful dialogue with others, even if they come from very different backgrounds and hold starkly different views. In doing so, students strengthen their sense of fairness, i.e. democratic and human rights values, stimulate inclusive processes in groups and generate tolerance and empathy – also practising conflict resolution and attunement where necessary (2025b). While sharing individual experiences, students are also encouraged to reflect on discriminatory and hostile impulses and their underlying personal motives and experiences, including those from their immediate social context and family history. In this way, narrative dialogue groups regularly create heightened self-awareness and increase the capacity to 'do democracy, inclusion and citizenship'.

### **The setting of the method**

In operational terms, students are invited to engage in open conversations in a safe space during school hours with trained NGO practitioners from outside the school, with guarantees

of confidentiality and voluntary participation, i.e. informed consent, with the option to withdraw at any time. In the planning phase with the schools, it is emphasised that the dialogue groups should run parallel to social, language and creative subjects, and that they are not only completely different from, but equally important as, the lessons taught, and are therefore offered as part of the curriculum.

For one hour a week, for at least one term, the groups involve existing classes, from which up to four smaller sub-groups can be formed, each with its own room. The basic settings are the two half-class groups, each facilitated by two NGO practitioners. A fifth practitioner hosts the time-out room, which is available to allow pupils to withdraw temporarily if necessary or to protect the group conversation. Preferably, these practitioners are of mixed gender and socio-culturally diverse backgrounds, so that sub-groups can be formed spontaneously, reflecting gender or other social criteria, or even group dynamics.

### **The method of facilitating narrative dialogue group work**

NGW's out-of-school dialogue practitioners are specially trained to facilitate open-process, narrative group conversations in which only the students in their group negotiate and decide on the spot what kinds of experiences and thoughts they want to raise and share, thus suspending all external agendas, controls and taboos. For example, the dialogue practitioners begin each session with the basic question: "So, how are things going?", "What's on your mind, here at school or beyond?", "How has it been since last week?", etc., or: "What would you like to talk about here today?" or at the beginning: "We are here to provide you with an open space so that you can talk to each other within the school – and we will just make sure that things go well and we can all talk as we like!". –

Experience has shown that despite, or perhaps because of, the complete openness of the subject matter, students naturally come to talk about experiences and issues that also touch on current socio-political topics, questions of social interaction – and phenomena of everyday extremism (e.g. different prejudices and emotional attitudes among young people, homophobia/sexism, bullying / hate speech, regional right-wing populism/ neo-Nazism, etc.).

Technically, the practitioners of NGW dialogue groups effectively facilitate narrative exchange and sharing, as opposed to argumentative discussion, by asking students 'situation questions' and 'narrative questions', as opposed to expressing reposts, corrections, clarifications or rebukes. For example, a 'situation question' might be: 'You just mentioned that you love Germany and want to defend and protect it. Can you think of a situation in which you have felt the need to protect Germany? Likewise, practitioners avoid why-questions and instead ask narrative how-questions: "Please tell me exactly what the situation was like?", "How did it

happen that ...?", "Can you please describe in more detail how things started and then developed – and how it affected you?", "Can you remember another experience that was similar or very different to this one? What was it like?"

The most important overarching element of the skills of dialogue practitioners is that they are able to facilitate a new kind of civic dialogue in groups, in which it becomes possible to set aside the usual patterns of (counter-) argument and discussion that we have internalised from a pervasive culture of debate and civic education – and instead cultivate an attitude of mutual curiosity, joint narrative exploration and relationship building – across various barriers and differences. In this way, students – or participants more broadly – are given a space in which they can quietly become aware of each other's experiences, circumstances and personal views. They will also learn to be more understanding and honest with each other and with themselves – and to attune and mediate different kinds of emotional escalation and expressions of everyday extremism and devaluation of others.

### **The group dynamic factor in democracy**

The fact that NGW is basically practised in groups – although of course narrative dialogue can and is also used in one-to-one interactions (e.g. in the time-out space) – underlines its pro-democratic and pro-human rights impact. It also underlines its ability to effectively attune and moderate (everyday) extremism, devaluation and hostility towards others, most of which occurs in small or large groups. For example, when the narrative dialogue between a facilitator and a student who has articulated harsh hostile attitudes of devaluation of others and expression of group-focused enmity (Heitmeyer et al. 2009, Zick et al. 2011, 27-42) has reached a certain point of dialogic exploration or needs to pause, facilitators can and should involve the whole group (Weilnböck 2024a,b). This is usually recommended as early as possible in order to avoid a dyadic ping-pong conversation and/or to defuse and at the same time benefit from dynamics of polarisation or emotionalisation that the intensive dialogue with one person may have created with the others. Ideally, this is done by asking questions that are as open as possible and that appeal to narratives of personal experience (and avoid the level of comments, opinions and arguments): "What can you others say about all this?", "What related personal experiences can you think of?", "Where else do you encounter such situations/issues? What happens in these situations? How do they unfold? Who are the people involved? What have you experienced with these people in other situations?" etc. The approach of working in narrative dialogue groups thus provides young people with a space that is free from set agendas and taboos – encouraging and enabling them to talk about and listen to individual thoughts and experiences – as opposed to discussing issues.

## **A community-focused approach to attunement**

Similarly, narrative dialogue groups are not just about groups of students or particular school classes. Rather, NGW is a community-focused approach to civic education and community building through bottom-up social dialogue – i.e. building on youth participation and engagement – that is able to create and support community-wide dialogue skills and attunement of non-conductive oppositional – so called extremist (Weinböck 2023a,b) – behaviour. This community impact is harnessed through a number of interfaces provided by the student groups in the classrooms.

First, there are two direct interfaces with the school itself: Pedagogically, the subject teaching in the regular classes can effectively pick up and benefit from what has been raised as issues in the students' life experience through the group work (while of course keeping personal details and contexts completely confidential and unidentifiable). Such themes and topics – be they from the media, local or national history, current politics, community issues, family issues, etc. – gain a high level of learning motivation through the group dynamic in which they arise; this can then be built upon by regular subject teaching to ensure the optimal educational impact of regular classroom teaching. For example, if the topic of the Holocaust and/or the Third Reich comes up in the group in the context of personal experience, the facilitators can suggest to the students that a teacher be asked to give an extra history lesson on this topic and that it be included in the curriculum, regardless of how the topic came up in the group in the first place.

The other immediate interface with the school itself concerns the possibility of providing advice to the school as an (educational) institution; the groups can provide a kind of "bottom-up school counselling" in that the NGO practitioners can bring to the attention of the school management observations made by the students and general issues of conflict and concern that have emerged in the group, and encourage further counselling and institutional change. It has often been observed that schools often face multiple challenges, including from the attitudes and behaviour of teachers and school staff, who may, for example, be openly or unintentionally inclined towards forms of everyday extremism, or otherwise fail to act in a fully professional and educational manner.

Secondly, and most importantly for individual students and their families, there is an important interface between dialogue groups and community youth and family services which provide forms of psychosocial intervention (e.g. mental health, suicide prevention, violence/sexual assault, substance abuse, etc.), including deradicalisation/exit counselling – since all these issues regularly come up in group work and long before the threshold at which

school social workers are approached. Also it has often been observed that such needs for psychosocial counselling often coincide with high levels of (everyday) extremism and non-conductive oppositional behaviour (Weilnböck 2025b) – so that such counselling by community youth and family services can also indirectly contribute to reducing and even reconciling (everyday) extremism – thus providing attunement in the sense of the Oppattune project.

Thirdly, interaction between the students of the group and their immediate social environment and community and feedback from the community can be directly encouraged by suggesting certain tasks as homework to students, e.g. ask students to interview persons in family, neighbourhood, community and organisations about certain observations and topics which have come up in the group – and then bring back to the group what has been collected from these community interviews. Such interview exercises being safely anchored in the dialogue group in school, can serve as a multiplier effect of building dialogue and attunement skills among students of the school.

Needless to say, all methods of furthering social dialogue and attunement are especially valuable for hard-to-reach youth and fractions of community, i.e. for students and groups who have been alienated from, or who have never experienced much social dialogue or democratic and human rights-based ways of life but rather live in spheres characterized by high levels of everyday forms of group focused hostility; since these individuals and groups we urgently need to win back into the social dialogue.

### **Narrative Attunement First Responder Skills**

The overarching purpose of the NGW approach is to foster emotional political intelligence and social skills of group dialogue in safe space settings especially for young people. However, NGW is also able to directly encourage and practice social dialogue outside of pedagogical intervention. An important methodological spin-off – and collateral benefit – that the method of Narrative Group Work has brought to other areas of social dialogue in the course of the Oppattune project is that it allows for the development of strategies and related training for Narrative Attunement First Responder Skills in emergencies of democracy (Cultures Interactive e.V. 2024a/b). Such edgy emergencies can unfold spontaneously when everyday extremist speech, non-conductive opposition and group-focused hostility occur in the public realm or outside of specifically arranged pedagogical settings that are designed to moderate and attune – be they in public transport, town hall situations, media complications (journalism) also regular school and university teaching, inter alia. In these situations some of what is done when facilitating narrative dialogue groups needs to be done or at least signaled in a very

short time span ranging from a few seconds to half a minute – which requires various swift and precise communicative reactions.

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