

"I wonder, are you really a cruel person?"

Reconstructive case description of two consecutive sessions of narrative group work with ninth graders in a school afflicted by regional right-wing extremism

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Already in the third session of this comparatively consensual and pro-social group (half of a school class), the students open up personally to a very large extent and share what they normally don't share in school before teachers or adults. This group was facilitated at a "rough school" the current ninth grade of which was called the "most difficult ever"; the school being situated in a rural community with high rates of right-wing extremism.

Hence, some of the students quickly built trust to the facilitators and begin to speak with great sincerity about their political attitudes as well as those of their families and village communities – some of which have strong right-wing extremist leanings. In many cases, the group facilitators from outside the school, coming from a distant big city, had assured the participants of their absolute confidentiality. Because of the continuous relationship building by the facilitators, the students in this group were able to develop an increasing level of confidence in this open and unbiased mode of conversation and personal exchange with the facilitators and with the other members of the group.

As a result, one fifteen-year-old uses this group session to relativize the Holocaust with a tone of conviction towards the end of the lesson. He very emphatically states that "the Holocaust wasn't that bad"; that "there weren't that many of them (killed)" and that "the Jews had always been persecuted". But, he says, that "Germany was so technically advanced ... We had the gas chambers ... and someone had to do it anyway"; and that "now only Germany has the blame for it" and "is forever being reproached". "And besides, what about the German prisoners of war in Russia? There were 270,000 of them, only 5000-6000 came back, ask yourself why that was! ... But at school you are not allowed to talk about such things anyway".

This relatively abrupt, drastic statement (evidently echoing stance of right-wing extremist groups and comradeships in the region and in the internet) can presumably be seen as an attempt by the fifteen-year-old to underpin his status in the group on the one hand and to test the trustworthiness and composure of the group facilitators on the other. The group facilitators, for their part, are given a welcome opportunity to enter into conversation and relationship through narrative interaction about a central topic of historical and civic education and thus to further deepen their work – and, of course, to prove their trustworthiness and ability to relate. At this moment, the group facilitators do not focus on contradicting or correcting the young man and bringing historical facts into the field (as experience shows that this hardly achieves pedagogical effects in such situations, but often leads to hardening). The fact that these allegations are factually false and also punishable by law in Germany and that they themselves do not hold this view is mentioned by the group facilitators rather incidentally, depending on the personal style and need for clarification of the respective facilitator. There is also no indication at this point of any doubt within the group towards the team's attitude, visibly coming from a metropolitan area, regarding questions about German history. At a later point, the facilitators will once again raise the

question of why such statements are forbidden under criminal law. They also explicitly indicate that this is regulated as such false statements can incite people, some of whom may then proceed to acts such as the attack in Halle or in Hanau. But this hint is also made at a later moment in an de-escalating manner, entirely without admonition or reproach.

At this moment, the group facilitators first express their fundamental respect for the openness with which the boy expresses himself – and then successively make an effort, together with the group, to open up the background of individual experience in which this statement is embedded. An initial, counter-provocative question, so to speak, as to whether he often provokes those around him with this or similar statements, initially only leads to the boy emphasizing the seriousness of his statement. The group facilitators' attitude to the conversation is then committed to the following line of questioning: "I don't agree with you about the Holocaust, which won't surprise you. But first tell me how you came to this and who you actually are. Do you often have conversations about these topics? Tell us a little bit about the people who say this to you? Do you ever have arguments? What else do you experience with them? What questions do you sometimes ask yourself? What do you experience when you say something like that in school?" This attitude of attentiveness, curiosity and the techniques of narrative conversation follows the basic pattern of "no-but-yes,-tell-me-more-about-it"; i.e., it leads away from the level of opinions, views, and facts and tries to approach the level of personal experience and memory.

The young man does not seem to want to get involved in this yet in this session at the end of the hour. And in this behavior he proves to be similar to those other students who display right-wing extremist attitudes and appear in other groups in a much more anti-social manner than is the case here. For this reason, the facilitators proceed as early as possible to involve the group as a whole, to counteract the polarization and emotionalization caused by the boy's probably intentional provocative statement, and to lead them in the direction of narrative points of contact. This proves to be hardly necessary in this case, since this comparatively trusting group brings itself into play quite quickly and is supported by the management with appropriate questions: "What can you others here say about this?" Above all the level of experience and less the level of opinion is addressed: "How do you others feel about these statements? What comes to your mind? Where else do you encounter these topics? What happens then? What is the process? Which people are involved? What do they do? What do you experience with them? etc."

At this point, a series of short, often simultaneously spoken and overlapping contributions emerge, which contain manifold possibilities for further deepening through narrative follow-up questions. Two students distance themselves, even using the technical term "Holocaust denial" themselves, thus indicating a certain adeptness in discourses of civic education. Another boy seems to want to differentiate the statement of the fifteen-year-old and explicitly agrees that "you can't talk about this in school". Another one informs the facilitators that such statements are often heard around here, which creates further possibilities for describing other, new experiential situations in the group. Two other students speak openly and about how their classmate "would be like that all the time" and how one should thus understand what he says ("that's his thing!"). The latter then refers to it in brief reactions, indicating a relatively high degree of consensuality and communality among this group. In fact, two similar situations are alluded to, offering further opportunities

for experiential immersion by narrative questions and sharing of and reflecting on situational experiences (for which there normally is no space in school).

This self-motivated, independent exchange, is led by the group in the presence of and with facilitators about this topic, speaking about their classmate as well. It leads to associated experience scenes and considerations that are pedagogically very valuable. This is because this self-determined process supports the students' narrative, reflective, and conversational skills. Numerous cognitive, thematic-analytical, as well as social, communicative, and emotional competencies are fostered as well in the process. In addition, it can be stated that in this session the topic of right-wing extremism in the region (and in some families) was brought up by the students themselves. It was from a very personal perspective and not suggested by the educators or by a planned teaching unit. Inquiries by the facilitators that are motivated by personal interest and that aim at the experiential level are always particularly effective.

But how can this promising situation be used in the sense of a holistic civic education?¹ So far, the group, in conjunction with the external facilitators, has firstly outlined its status quo in terms of Holocaust awareness and associated themes of right-wing extremist ideology. These and the interaction scenes and experiences are many and indispensable, which are due to the setting provided for this purpose. Now a development beyond this would have to be initiated – and this also because this status quo would otherwise remain merely in confirmation and reinforcement. Such further development can be initiated in many ways by means of the above-mentioned possibilities of personally interested, narrative inquiry, the subsequent illumination of the ensuing situation in the group and the self-reflection thereof (cf. above: comparable situations, which people are involved, what do they do; what do the teachers say; how do you feel about it? etc.). Each of these questions would lead to relevant exchange of personal experiences, observations and reflections, which would otherwise hardly occur in school, neither in class nor in informal student conversations – and in which the facilitators can also contribute and accentuate.

In this particular situation shortly before the end of the session, one of the facilitators decides to make the following narrative inquiry, which does not follow any of the aforementioned paths. He directly addresses the young man: "When I listen to you talk about the Holocaust, I ask myself above all whether you are possibly a cruel person. What do you mean? Can you perhaps tell me a situation from your life where you would say, yes, I was cruel – and sometimes I am a cruel person?" And because the end of the session is near, the facilitators open this question to everyone else and present it to the group as a weekly task: "All of you, think about whether you have ever, or even more often, said similar things to your classmate about the National Socialist era – and, regardless of whether you are sometimes a cruel person and what situations there might be to tell about this! ... But at the same time, we always keep in mind that we don't tell others anything about our conversations here that can be directly traced back to a person."

¹ Which can also be called an intensive pedagogical civic education; cf. Weilnböck, Harald (2020): Intensivpädagogische politische Bildung – Narrative Gesprächsgruppen an Schulen im ländlichen und kleinstädtischen Raum. Ergebnisse der qualitativen Selbstevaluation von Gesprächsgruppen im Jahr 2019. <https://cultures-interactive.de/en/articles.html>

In the follow-up session, it becomes apparent that some of the students have actually taken this task to heart, which does not always happen in group work at the current project state. Evidence also emerges that the young people have since talked among themselves about the group's issues during recess and outside of school, probably including political discussions. In any case, the fifteen-year-old and two classmates report that they had thought about it and had come to the conclusion that they were not cruel. They couldn't remember any situations. However, the conversation continued to the effect that they made the observation about themselves that they didn't have such strong feelings anyway, and were generally rather numb and insensitive in emotional respects.

Overall, there was quite a big change in the group conversation, both thematically and in terms of mood, compared to the last session. The latter had been predominantly provocative and boisterous. This was up to the point that the fifteen year old lastly attempted to explain to the others in the group how one could get access to the (illegal) right-wing extremist videos on YouTube in which his views on the Holocaust were represented. (This could then be prevented by pointing out that confidentiality exists in the conversation groups, and that nothing illegal should take place. The dissemination of right-wing extremist material is also illegal, which the participants had agreed to without hesitation). In contrast, the present follow-up session, in which the topic of cruelty is taken up, is rather contemplative. Suddenly there is a lot of talk about the topic of death and dying – and also about being sad – although it is not entirely clear to the facilitators how this topic came up in the group to begin with (which does certainly corresponded to the topics of the Holocaust and cruelty). Thus, the group talks about various experiences of deaths within the families but also about the death of animals, be it on the farms or of pets. It can be assumed that informal conversations among the students preceded the group meeting.

During the course of the conversation, in its free and predominantly self-determined group dynamics, the fifteen-year-old, who previously had relativized and partly denied the Holocaust leading to the question of cruelty, made an astonishing remark. The boy tells about how it was when the paternal grandmother, who lived in the house, died, and how the father did not flinch, then "did his thing normally the next day". The boy reports this in context to the theme of insensitivity and emotional numbness, that he and two classmates had observed about themselves. This also as an answer to the question about his possible cruelty. He then suddenly also makes the sober and deeply convinced statement that he believes his parents "probably wouldn't be sad if he died".

Curiously, this completely sober yet depressing presentation that his parents "would probably not be sad if he died" represents a new moment of great personal sincerity in the group conversation. It is similar to the moment of the brazen Holocaust denial, however, in a completely different way. The question is, therefore, in which respects the previous moment of Holocaust denial is related to the present moment of the follow-up session about death, emotional numbness and lack of sadness on the part of the parents. Furthermore, which pedagogical effects and potentials of holistic, intensive pedagogical civic education are contained in facilitating the joint group experience of such a sequence of moments of conversation, for the individual and for the group as a whole. And to what extent the procedure and method of narrative group work can help to bring forth such a sequence of moments of conversation.

Admittedly, the second moment had followed directly from the first with some consistency. For the striking Holocaust denial, to which space could be given in the group, leads to the question of possible personal cruelty on the part of the young man and the group. This then first sets the corresponding homework of thinking about cruelty in motion. And then in turn leads to introspections about moments of one's own emotional callousness and numbness, which then brings to light memories of moments of callousness on the part of one's parents, especially toward the topics of dying/death. At the group level, this is then followed by a general conversation about death, dying, and emotional insensitivity, leading the young man to the very striking personal assessment that his parents would probably not regret it if he died.

Without even recognizing a possible connection between the young man's two statements (the Holocaust; the parents and his emotional numbness) one can assume the following: The fact that both – and similar – moments can occur and be shared in a group of students and that the views and experiences that occur can be talked about openly, unconditionally and trustingly (especially in an institution about which the students say that one is "not allowed to talk about such things here anyway") is significant for the personality and competence development of each individual in the group. This is because talking openly about essential personal, historical and political issues is of great pedagogical effectiveness for the general school curriculum of supporting intellectual, emotional and social skills. Also the topics and issues touched upon are highly relevant for the specific curriculum in the school subject s history and civic education (also democracy education).

This pedagogical effect can then be deepened in many ways by the facilitators. First of all, they can react with compassion and as attentive fellow human beings and in this way also set an example of empathetic presence. For example by saying: "Oh, I'm sorry about your parents. That must not feel so good to think that about ones parents." This may then be followed by further follow-up questions, comments, or experiences from the young man or other youth in the group that can be recorded, further supporting psycho-social learning and the development of emotional intelligence. More detailed reflection can then be further prompted by remarks such as, "Somehow it doesn't surprise me as much now that you sometimes say things that are so cruel and you don't seem to notice." Of course, as an authentic civic education group facilitator, you can also just say what you think: "I just had the idea that maybe that's why you're saying all these right-wing extremist things, because there's this thing of insensitivity and numbness with you and your parents – and partly with you others, as well." Should the group or individuals then even succeed in recognizing a psychological connection between numbness/ Holocaust denial and emotional undersupply – and one should not underestimate high school student's intuitive psychological intelligence! – then the pedagogical effectiveness of this course of the conversation would be maximally strengthened.

However, the unconditional prerequisite for this to happen is that the group conversation takes place in a completely open, self-determined manner, without setting any topics and taboos or drawing red lines, and also remaining confidential and voluntary. This must be the case so that the students can no longer say "we can't talk about something like that anyway". Most importantly, an open, friendly basic attitude must be provided by facilitators – no matter what content is expressed.

For the further course of this group session, it will come as no surprise that the topic of cruelty comes up over and over- i.e., in the rudimentary, cautious conversation about fathers "who are right-wing" and who are sometimes also cruel. And even if the topic of right-wing fathers were not given, cruelty as a topic has highest priority in regards to civic education and extremism prevention. For beyond cognitive and ideological aspects, cruelty and (group) hatred are likely to be among the central motivations of group-based hatred/ "enmity" and violent extremism, so that intensive pedagogical civic education, which also includes political emotions and affects and thus takes an intensive pedagogical approach, will always focus on the experience of cruelty.

Regarding the topic of cruelty/ numbness and its opposite, the friendly basic attitude of the facilitators, a significant remark of the Holocaust denier arises quite incidentally in a later session. For the latter says to the facilitator with a Turkish family background in passing in a very affectionate way: "As friendly as you are, you must surely be on the left...". This shows that the young man himself makes a connection between emotional coldness/unfriendliness/cruelty and right-wing/right-wing extremist political attitudes. In this, an emotional resilience factor emerges – and the importance of promoting emotional intelligence in civic education becomes apparent.

From the perspective of civic education and the extremism prevention, it is safe to assume that the greatest possible impact that can be achieved in the environment of young people with right-wing extremist milieus and families has been achieved in this group. After all, it would be delusional to believe that a young man, like the 15-year-old, could decisively distance himself from his affect of Holocaust denial through a concentrated event of political-historical education, then becoming an emphatic democrat and human rights advocate.

On the other hand, considering the course of this narrative conversation group, one may justifiably hope that that 15-year-old will hardly ever again so brazenly tread the paths of Holocaust denial in the future and then, in the long run, will no longer seek them out at all. For he – and the group around him – will always remember the conversations about cruelty, insensibility/ emotional numbness and his assumption about his presumably insensible and indifferent parents. Especially since these conversations were shared and reinforced by a group of his classmates who were important to him. They had a direct share in the conversations and were involved in them as well. In the future, the facilitators will also do their part to actively keep this significant moment of the intersection of the political and the biographical-familial in the group memory. They will do this by recalling it when the opportunity arises and by keeping the themes of insensibility/cruelty and the Holocaust as the leitmotif of their group facilitation. As for the specialized teaching on the subject of the Holocaust and Holocaust denial that should follow at this point, building on this outcome of a process of holistic, intensive civic education and continue to consolidate the results, should be all the more effective – which makes it all the more important to create a link and between open narrative group work and self-reflection and formal teaching on matters of history and civic engagement. Hence, including the element of open and entirely confidential group work, practicing narrative conversation, into formal school teaching procedures (provided by independent external practitioners for confidentiality and trust-building reasons) may be key for the success of schooling in a period of increasing mainstream radicalisation throughout European societies.