

The Importance of Significant Others in Preventing Extremism: The Philosophy and Practice of the Swedish Tolerance Project

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journals.sagepub.com/home/you**Alida Skiple¹****Abstract**

This article concerns a specific educational programme to reduce recruitment to racist and extreme organizations in Sweden. The programme is called the Tolerance Project, and it functions as an elective course offered to a selected group of young people. Looking into assumptions and ideas underlying the programme, the article describes the importance of significant others in preventing extremism. Data consist of descriptions of the programme and field notes obtained from course participation and talking to course leaders. The tolerance educators express a broad understanding of socialization, in which parents are considered as important conversation partners, and that their own job is to facilitate democratic dialogue. Most notably, the course creates new peer constellations and encourages participants to become ‘ambassadors of tolerance’, able to confront intolerance in the arenas in which they are normally located. The overall idea is to improve the various social contexts in which potential ‘at-risk’ youth are located.

Keywords

Extreme nationalism, Holocaust education, prevention, socialization, Sweden

Introduction

Following the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, opposition and violence towards immigrants have increased all over Europe. In most liberal democracies, such as the Nordic countries, this has led to a renewed focus on the early prevention of racism and extremism, which are considered to threaten democracy. As one of the main institutions for the safeguarding of democracy today, the school is often considered

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a key preventive arena. This is reflected in governmental action plans against radicalization and violent extremism, and the increasing development of anti-racist and citizenship education programmes directed at young people, and especially adolescents. Such educational initiatives to prevent extremism, however, lack scientific definition, and it is not always clear what role educational professionals are supposed to have in them (Aly et al., 2014; Fangen & Carlsson, 2013; Pels & de Reuyter, 2012; Sivenbring, 2017). A relevant question is whether ‘good teaching’ is enough to counter extremism, or some sort of special focus is needed (Davies, 2018, p. 47). This article examines a Swedish educational programme that focuses specifically on young people at risk of being recruited into racist and extreme organizations.

In 2015, a programme called the Tolerance Project (referred to as the TP in this article) was given a central position in the government-initiated resource centre for front-line professionals against extremism in Sweden (<http://segerstedtinstitutet.gu.se/om-si>). The programme thus became part of the national policy against violent extremism. Apart from a study of the economic benefits of reducing racist activity in the municipality where it was developed (Lundmark & Nilsson, 2013), there is no published research on the TP. The only sources are written by the initiator of the programme, who provides examples of how the course lessons can be organized, and describes how it differs from ordinary teaching (Mattsson & Adler, 2012, 2008). The main difference between the TP and ordinary teaching is said to be the cooperation with the home and overall society (Mattsson & Adler, 2012, p. 67). This corresponds to the findings of research undertaken during the previous wave of anti-immigrant violence in the Nordic countries in the 1990s that prevention occurs in several arenas, and not just in school (Bjørge & Carlsson, 2005). The need for close cooperation between various preventive agents, such as the family, the school and civil society, is thus a recurring point in research on preventing right-wing extremism (Carlsson, 2006; de Winter 2012). In this article, I am interested in how this is reflected in the TP today. *What are the assumptions and ideas underlying the philosophy and practice of the TP about how, or by whom, preventing extremism should be done?*

In order to capture the assumptions and ideas about prevention that underlie the programme, the official descriptions of the course and ethnographic material gathered from fieldwork are analysed. The fieldwork was done in a Swedish region that was implementing the programme in several municipalities in the school year 2015–2016. Before I describe the theoretical framework that has helped me explain and organize the findings, I will provide a short introduction of what the TP is and the context in which it was developed.

The Development of the Tolerance Project

In 1995, a 14-year-old boy was murdered in Kungälv, in Western Sweden, by a group of young boys, aged 15–18, with close ties to the local White Power movement. As a response, a local teacher (Christer Mattsson) was assigned by the municipality to create a strategy to prevent further recruitment to such groups. Instead of confronting the perceived troublemakers at school, the solution became to address the whole social structure around these individuals. The metaphor of a ‘grape cluster’ was used to describe a core group of intolerant youth, their followers, ideological

confirmers, social confirmers, girls and seekers, held together by a stem of ‘social unrest’ (Mattsson, 2013; Mattsson & Adler, 2012, p. 61). The grape cluster model corresponds with research, pointing to the various motivations for recruitment to racist organizations in the 1990s (Bjørge, 2002; Fangen, 1999; Kimmel, 2007; Lööv, 2009). Specific to the TP is the mixing of young people from the grape cluster with young people who perform well and who are not causing social unrest at school; hence, ‘establishing new, positive and social relationships’ (Mattsson, 2013, p. 8). The purpose is to meet – not exclude – young people with intolerant attitudes and, by listening to their arguments and promoting dialogue between different perspectives, to get them ‘to realize the value of participating in a democratic community’ (Mattsson & Adler, 2008, p. 9).

While the programme is in line with the general preventive strategy in the Nordic countries of increasing citizenship and anti-racist education, it stands out as being one of very few initiatives that is offered only to a selected group of participants and has been developed especially to target young people at risk of being drawn to racist or extreme organizations. Each version of the programme is based on a local problem analysis by a municipality that has committed to work with it. Once a school is chosen, the programme is presented as a vocational course open for applications from all 14- and 15-year-olds. The course developers then select participants for the programme according to the grape cluster model. The course consists of about ten full or half-day sessions, lasting throughout the school year.

A substantial part of the TP curriculum is made up of stories and lessons about the Holocaust. One benefit of this strategy is that there is a vast array of narratives and teaching material based on the Holocaust (Mattsson & Adler, 2012, p. 16). In addition to the benefits of teaching about the Holocaust, in order for it not to happen again (Adorno, 2003; Bauman, 2000), it has become widely accepted that the Holocaust provides useful lessons about citizenship, human rights and participatory democracy (Short & Reed, 2004). Parallel with the development of the TP, Sweden’s Prime Minister at the time Göran Persson pioneered Holocaust education and remembrance, through the establishment of the ‘Living history’ campaign (Karlsson, 2016), which turned into a committee under the Ministry of Culture ‘commissioned to work with issues related to tolerance, democracy and human rights’, (Living History Forum, 2018). Many of the TP lessons build on material, which can be found in the Living History Forum’s database. The programme is thus part of a larger strategy to prevent extreme nationalism in Sweden, using Holocaust education.

Preventing Extreme Nationalism

The Swedish commitment to promoting Holocaust education is an example of a general preventive strategy, meaning that the efforts are directed at everyone. The underlying idea of general prevention is that one cannot know exactly who will end up in extreme organizations and not. There is, however, one recurring indicator and that is some form of marginalization or social exclusion (Fangen, 1999). What is known about some of the young people who ended up in extreme nationalist groups in the 1990s is that they had ‘a strong feeling of not being appreciated—neither by parents, by teachers and classmates, by labour market or by society in general’ (Bjørge, 1997, p. 324). For some young people, extreme nationalist groups thus

constituted an alternative social setting for the fulfilment of different ‘social and psychological needs such as providing identity, community, protection and excitement – quite normal needs that they have not got fulfilled in ordinary contexts’ (Bjørge & Carlsson, 2005, p. 7). Social exclusion and vulnerability have also been found to be indicators for recruitment to other kinds of extremist groups (European Commission, 2017, p. 41). Although there are some archetypical pathways to extremism, the various life stories that have been gathered through research indicate a wide variation of causes and factors, which may or may not be influenced (Köhler, 2016, p. 112).

In cases where general prevention has not been successful at hindering recruitment, the second preventive strategy is to direct initiatives at a specific target group. This usually involves dealing with older individuals who may already be supporting an extreme movement, but they are not fully committed to it or absorbed in this alternative life style. A known strategy in dealing with potential defectors from right-wing groups has been to create ‘an alternative reference group’, by empowering family members and friends, in order to promote debate between different standpoints (Köhler, 2015, p. 125). If family members and friends do not constitute a sufficient reference group to encourage a potential defector to follow his or her doubts about the groups he or she belongs to, there are various mentor programmes that can assist in this process. One of the best known is the EXIT programmes, which employ former defectors of similar rank to the client as mentors (Christensen, 2015; Köhler, 2015). We also know from various defector stories that there was often an adult (other than a parent) who played a role in their defecting process (Eiternes & Fangen, 2002; Kimmel, 2007).

Whether the person who is able to provide an alternative reference group for individuals on the path to leaving a racist or extremist group is a family member, a friend or a professional mentor, and whether this is done consciously as an intervention or unconsciously as general prevention, the key factor is to become significant enough to influence the process towards democratic behaviour and against extremism. In this study, the term ‘significant other’ will be used as an analytical category to understand how the TP works. The term is derived from socialization theory.

Socialization Theory

Socialization is a continuous process of acquiring the norms, rules, morals, world view, knowledge and language—in sum, all the social skills and competences—needed to function in a specific social group or culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Frønes, 1995; Maccoby, 2007). It is common to distinguish between primary socialization—what is first learnt at home, such as from parents and close relatives—and secondary socialization—what is later learnt outside the home, such as in schools or other social institutions. Building on G. H. Mead’s concept of ‘taking the role of the other’ (Mead, 1934), the term ‘significant other’ has been used to identify the most influential actors in primary and secondary socialization. Significant others are usually divided into three main groups: parents or any other person young people have an emotional connection to in their first stages of life; professional socialization agents, whom young people usually have fewer emotional ties to; and peers, that is, those of equal rank (Strain, 1981), or same age. The significant others

are not everyone young people relate to, but those regarded as significant interaction partners or ‘the society’s messengers to the child’ (Frønes, 1995, p. 36).

In the following sections, I will discuss relevant research on socialization and prevention of anti-social or extreme behaviour among young people.

The Home and Parents

Traditionally, parents have been regarded as the most important socialization agents during childhood, which means they have also been blamed if young people show signs of inadequate socialization (de Winter, 2012; Maccoby, 2007). It is argued that one of the most decisive factors in preventing violent behaviour and crime is the ability of parents to show care in combination with the ability to set limits for their children (Gottfredson and Hirschi, cited in Bjørge & Carlsson, 1999). The ideal of good and democratic parenting is something in between strict authoritarianism (from Adorno et al., 1950) and a too easy-going attitude (de Winter, 2012, p. 8; Maccoby, 2007, p. 18). In addition to not properly ‘socializing’ their children, parents can influence them negatively by promoting a world view or morality in opposition to the specific society or culture. Young people who join extreme nationalist groups often have parents who share the same ideology or at least legitimate their activism (Ezekiel, 2002; Löow, 2000; Simi, 2016). Many of the young people who were part of Swedish Nazi groups in the 1990s were grandchildren of National Socialist activists from the 1930s (Löow, 2000, p. 254). As an expert on Swedish Nazism, Löow states that there has been a continuous history of National Socialism in certain parts of Sweden (2015). In such areas, it is assumed by front-line professionals that parents or grandparents might pass on racism or resentment towards immigrants to the younger population (Skiple, 2018).

In Nordic and other post-industrial societies today, where young people tend not to follow their parents’ professions, there is less emphasis on parents as key transmitters of work skills and knowledge. What becomes more important is that parents are there for their children to talk to: ‘modern family ideology places great importance on parents as conversational partners and advisers in emotional matters’ (Frønes, 1995, p. 38). At the same time, young people spend less time with their parents and more time in educational as well as leisure institutions, surrounded by professional socialization agents.

The School and Teachers

While families are independent arenas for primary socialization and education, schools provide a social setting that is common for all young people and transfer the same set of knowledge and lessons to the future generations, in order to make ‘a better future society’ (Dewey, 2010). The Nordic school system is characterized by the existence of socializing agents with teaching qualifications and the systematization of peer groups by classes divided by age. The more time young people spend outside the home, the more social institutions such as kindergarten and schools are important for primary socialization (Frønes, 2016). It should be noted that teachers do not become significant others simply by profession, as their main assignment is ‘transmitting specific knowledge’ (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

In terms of preventing extreme nationalism, the school has a central role as a main provider of basic democratic attitudes and knowledge: ‘this includes attitudes to violence, racism and xenophobia, and knowledge about Nazism, the annihilation of Jews and the Second World War’ (Bjørge & Carlsson, 1999, p. 183). The school is also an important arena in which young people can be seen, heard and taken seriously. That is a common need, which has been found among individuals in various extreme nationalist movements in Europe and the USA (Bjørge, 1997; Cockburn, 2007; Ezekiel, 2002; Fangen, 1999). Sometimes when young people are not seen or heard sufficiently at home, the school can meet this need. When it comes to extreme ideas and attitudes, however, this might be easier said than done.

Scholars of education and extremism suggest that the best strategy is to create a safe environment for debates at school, where attention is directed to the issues that trouble young people rather than meeting issues of divergence with moral contempt or ignorance (Sieckelink et al., 2015; Sivenbring, 2017). To achieve this, educators must acknowledge the existence of political differences and learn to challenge absolutes of ‘black and white’ (Cockburn, 2007). Sometimes this requires specific knowledge development or additional training for teachers. Despite Sweden’s determination to provide Holocaust education to all young people, it has been found that many teachers lack the necessary competence to deal with it in class (Lange, 2008). Teachers might also hold similar albeit unconscious racist and xenophobic beliefs themselves (de los Reyes & Wingborg, 2002; Dovemark, 2012). The sensitive nature of such topics has therefore led to the suggestion that prevention of right-wing extremism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism might benefit from focusing on a few schools or models (Johansson, 2013).

Peers and Friendships

The third group of socialization agents is also to be found at school, but it differs from both parents and teachers, as the personal relationship is characterized by equal rank. As opposed to the relationship between young people and adults, which is usually a given, the relationship between peers can be chosen and is driven by the desire for recognition (Frønes, 2016, p. 57). Peers and friends are especially important during adolescence, when young people emancipate themselves from the family and transition to adulthood (Frønes, 1995, p. 41). It is further argued that the ability to take on the role of others, and thus develop, is more likely to appear between people who regard themselves as equals (Frønes, 2016, p. 62). Although a lot has been written about the role of peers in young people’s moral development (Harris, 1998; Kohlberg, 1975; Piaget, 1968; Youniss, 1980), emphasizing the role of peers in preventing extremism is relatively new. A relevant research area that shows how friends and peers influence each other is that of bullying. While having close friends can have a buffering effect on peer victimization, being a target of peer victimization can have long-lasting effects on young people, lasting sometimes into adulthood (Bukowski et al., 2007). Many schools, especially in the Nordic countries, have therefore turned to the traditional anti-bullying programme developed by the psychologist Dan Olweus to counter bullying at an early stage (Olweus, 1999).

In addition to influencing one’s peers by standing up to bullying or intolerance, peers can take part in the development of preventive initiatives. That means

considering ‘peer groups as part of the intervention structure’ and regarding trend-setting peers as ‘intervention allies’ (Miller-Johnson & Costanzo, 2004, p. 220). The idea of peers as intervention allies is based on the notion that mixing high-risk and low-risk youth can prevent problem behaviour in itself (Miller-Johnson & Costanzo, 2004, p. 219). Peers are also more likely to learn from each other when it comes to sensitive topics. As an example, a study of sex education at school indicated that young people perceived their peers as providers of more relevant and up-to-date knowledge about the topic than their teachers (Honkasalo, 2014). Friends have also been found to be better than school counsellors or even family members in noticing early signs of radicalization among young people (Williams et al., 2015). This supports the idea of peers as allies also when it comes to preventing violent extremism.

The Relevance of Socialization Theory for Understanding the Tolerance Project

In sum, the path leading some young people to engage in extreme nationalist and undemocratic movements is influenced by the kind of interaction that the person has had with other individuals who may or may not become ‘significant’. ‘For parents and other stakeholders, socialization is the process promoting children’s access to and success in pro-social contexts while limiting their access to contexts that encourage or condone antisocial behavior’ (Cavell et al., 2007, p. 48). In other words, preventing recruitment to extreme groups, means making sure that the democratic and positive contexts outweigh the extreme and negative contexts in which ‘at-risk’ youth are located. During the previous wave of anti-immigrant violence in the 1990s, a solution was often to physically transfer problematic youths or the whole family to another school or geographical area (Bjørge & Carlsson, 1999). This provided the ‘at-risk’ youth with a new social context, while physically limiting access to the negative context. Another solution is to improve the existing social contexts around problematic youths or deviant groups (Cavell et al., 2007, p. 51). Improving various contexts is a central tenet of the TP. I have therefore applied the concept of significant others as an analytical tool to understand and structure the findings of this research.

Methodology

In this study, official descriptions of the TP, combined with observational field notes from the programme in practice, have been subject to an analysis of ‘the presence of ideas’ (Bratberg, 2014, p. 57). The purpose of this is to reveal the normative (valuations) and descriptive ideas of how the world looks and how things are connected as ‘casual beliefs’ (Bratberg, 2014, pp. 58–59). The three types of significant other function as analytical categories or ideal types. What I have found are the underlying assumptions and ideas of what role parents, teachers and peers have in preventing intolerance, racism and extremism. It should be noted that the data are based on the perspective of those who have made and developed the programme, and not the ideas of everyone involved, such as the participants and

their parents. As with politicians, who are most often subject to analysis of ideas, the subjects of my study talked about something they believe in. I therefore interpreted each quote as an expression of a particular idea (Bratberg, 2014, p. 79).

Data

In May 2015, I met a regional coordinator of the TP at a conference on preventing violence-promoting extremism in Sweden. The coordinator introduced me to a group of educators who had just taken the project leader course called 'Tolerans, Identitet och Extremism' (PDG691) at Gothenburg University. I asked if I could join their lessons once they started up at school. One project group agreed to let me participate. The group consisted of 14 pupils and 3 adult project leaders. It started up in October 2015 and ended in June 2016. In this period, the group met for five half-day sessions; one day session, including an excursion to meet a concentration camp survivor living in Sweden; three whole days in Krakow; and one day of an exhibition at school. In addition to field notes and observations, I received two written pupil assignments, along with an anonymous evaluative survey, which the participants were given at the end. During the course of the project period, I attended five local meetings with the three project leaders and a varying number of municipality employees involved in the decision-making process. In these meetings, I mostly observed and listened to their discussions. During the sessions with the participants, I participated more in the activities and exercises. The level of participation was often assigned to me by those I studied, which is typical for a partly participating observer (Fangen, 2004, p. 75).

Parallel to following one course, I participated in three regional TP meetings, which had been arranged by the coordinator to share and discuss best practices with those leading projects from other municipalities. These meetings were held in December 2015, and in February and June 2016. This allowed me to validate some of the specific findings. In January 2016, I attended two days of the project leader course at the Segerstedt Institute, and read through the curriculum that was used in the training, including the 'Tolerance lesson' instruction book by Mattsson and Adler (2012).

Throughout my fieldwork, I had several informal conversations with the tolerance educators and municipality employees involved in the implementation process. In this article, I refer to an interview conversation with Iben, the headmaster of the school in Glimmerdagg that allowed me to participate in their project group; Anna, Mona and Henrik, three of the most experienced tolerance educators in the municipality of Strömsby; and Dagrunn, a municipality employee responsible for implementing the programme in the neighbouring municipality of Klackamo. I have anonymized the whole region in consideration of all the participants of my study, as individuals would be easily identifiable by knowledge of location. All names, both people and locations, are therefore pseudonyms.

Findings and Analysis

In the following sections, I will provide some examples from the material that illustrate the assumptions and ideas underlying the philosophy and practice of the TP about how, or by whom, prevention should be done. Because the tolerance

educators express various ideas about their own and the young participants' roles, I will discuss some tensions that arise from this.

The Home and Parents

The philosophy of the TP with regard to the parents is that every participant's family is an important and necessary resource for the programme to reach its goals (Mattsson & Adler, 2012, p. 57). According to a description of the programme presented at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), social unrest at school occurs 'when parents of the youth concerned have become passive for some reason' (Mattsson, 2013, p. 8). In other words, problems are believed to arise when parents do not constitute the necessary reference group for the particular youth to develop in a democratic manner. It is further believed that it is the role of the tolerance educators to turn this trend around and emancipate the parents to become the 'conversation partners' (Frønes, 1995) they are meant to be.

During the course of the programme, parents are expected to read their children's assignments and be available for discussion. In the sessions I participated in, the educators asked if the participants had discussed at home the things they had learnt in previous lessons, especially after hearing the story of the 92-year-old survivor of the Holocaust, and visiting the concentration camps in Auschwitz. The educators' expectation that the participants discussed their impressions from these events at home indicates an idea of parents as important conversation partners, especially concerning emotional topics or experiences.

The tolerance educators also facilitated child–parent dialogue in a more direct manner. An often-used assignment was asking the parents to write a letter to their child before the Poland trip. The assignment in Glimmerdagg read: 'What do you want to say to your child?' Once in Krakow, the letters were handed out after one of the tolerance educators had told a story about a woman who had worked folding the used clothes from dead children to be reused in one of the concentration camps, and that 'one day she recognized the clothes of her own child' (Field notes, April 2016). Here, the educators created an emotional setting for child–parent dialogue. The participants knew about the letters, but not exactly when it would be handed out. When the letter exercise was discussed in a regional meeting, one of the other tolerance educators raised a concern about parents who were uncomfortable with expressing themselves in writing and how this might affect those who did not receive a letter (Mona, regional TP meeting, June 2016). It was suggested that the tolerance educators could pass on the message from the parent verbally, again accentuating the role of the educators as mediator between the participants and their parents. This idea takes for granted that the educators are themselves significant for those who participate in the course.

Another point that I came across, in the local project meetings I attended, was the belief that some parents affected young people in a negative direction when it came to racist attitudes (Skiple, 2018). 'These thoughts are not coming from the children. It is contagious' (Anna, local TP meeting, November 2015). The assumption here is that some adults will pass on their racist world view to the younger generation. This reflects an idea that the role of parents in preventing extreme nationalism is sometimes limited and highlights the importance of young people's relationships to other adult role models, such as teachers.

The School and Teachers

The teachers or social workers who volunteer to become tolerance educators are expected by the initiator of the programme to become ‘good adult role models’ (Mattsson, 2013, p. 12) and to invest time and effort in so doing. Since 2015, the course on ‘Tolerance, Identity and Extremism’ at Gothenburg University became mandatory for all project leaders. Becoming a tolerance educator therefore involves a specific commitment to prevent social unrest, intolerance, racism and extremism, in addition to being a good teacher or social worker.

During my fieldwork, I met with educators who were experienced and newly educated project leaders. In a conversation with one of the most experienced educators in the region Anna, I asked, what she thought could explain successful—and unsuccessful—intervention. ‘It is about the long-term perspective, to be an adult that does not let go’ (Field notes, June 2016). Again, this accentuates the idea that some parents are failing to socialize their children, who is therefore in need of another lasting adult relationship. The long-term perspective was also a key element in my conversations with Henrik. For him, it was very important to keep contact with the participants after the course, to be an adult resource to turn to (Field notes, January 2016). The way he kept in contact was either through Facebook or through his profession as a youth worker, being present in other social arenas where young people would meet. When I followed him to work in the local youth club, he notified me when we met former TP participants (Field notes, January 2016).

In the sixth TP session in Glimmerdagg, we were visited by a defector from an extreme nationalist movement, who told us that it was exactly the presence of another adult who ‘would not let go’ that helped him get out of the organization he was part of (Field notes, February 2016). The prerequisite for such a relationship being made through the TP is that the tolerance educators are able to bond with the particular ‘at-risk’ youth. This highlights an important point that some trained professionals might become a significant other for some young people, but not all. Although the tolerance educators were generally interested in the topic and had received additional training, the ability to succeed came down to the personality type, as Anna explained when I asked her about the style of teaching: ‘Nobody necessarily copies Christer’s style ... you need to see yourself as a tool in their process and find a way in based on your own personality’ (Field notes, June 2016). The idea articulated here is that failure of intervention might be due to a failure in the relationship between the particular ‘at-risk’ youths who participate in the project and the particular adults leading it. I did not experience the project leaders explicitly discussing this during my fieldwork. What they did discuss, however, was the role of some of the other teachers at the school. Just before the course started, the tolerance educators expressed concern that some of the teachers were part of a negative structure against newly arrived refugees (Local TP meeting, October 2016). Another concern was that some of the other teachers thought they did not have to deal with ‘at-risk’ youth, now that the programme had been implemented for that purpose (Henrik, field notes, January 2016). This reveals a certain paradox; while the tolerance educators might regard themselves as especially well equipped to prevent racism and intolerance, they did not believe that they were the only solution.

Peers and Friendship

One of the key components of the TP is to facilitate and promote dialogue between so-called intolerant or ‘at-risk’ youth and tolerant or ‘well-socialized’ youth, that is, to improve peer relationships. According to the teacher who initially developed the programme, intolerant participants return to their normal classes with a socially improved and more satisfactory behaviour, once the course is over—while the tolerant or ‘secure’ participants have had the opportunity to influence the others in the group and support them in the process (Mattsson & Adler, 2012, pp. 65–66). This form of peer support is believed to be especially important for those who want to leave a social structure that has low status in society at large (Mattsson, 2013, p. 5). Any group or organization with a racist affiliation or history in a liberal democratic society such as Sweden today is a good example of that.

In practice, the tolerance educators have been found to select participants for the programme based on various problematizations, such as everyday racism and generational racism, not just ‘at-risk’ youth (Skiple, 2018). A frequent discussion among the tolerance educators in both the local and the regional meetings I attended was whether they had successfully recruited the most intolerant young people, meaning those belonging to the core of the grape cluster, who they thought would benefit most from this kind of intervention. It was often argued that those who had been recruited were close friends of the particular ‘at-risk’ youth, especially girls who were just ‘hanging around’, or young people regarded as ‘seekers’ (Regional TP meeting, February 2016). The young people who were selected for participation thus constituted the core target groups’ immediate reference group. According to the tolerance educators in Glimmerdagg, the aim was not primarily to challenge susceptible young people, but to create ‘ambassadors of tolerance’, able to confront prejudice and intolerance and thus build a ‘culture for tolerance’ at school (Local TP meeting, November 2015). Henrik explained to me later that ‘the point of the ambassador perspective is to make people dare to interfere if they see someone being bullied (...) by participating in the course you learn that you are not alone’ (Field notes, October 2016). The underlying assumption here is that some young people do not dare to interfere when they see racism or harassment because they are afraid of retaliation—that what they need is to further develop their arguments and build self-esteem to stand up for their beliefs. An employee in a municipality who had worked with the programme for many years confirmed that spiral effects were a major motivation for the continuing work: ‘previous participants can step forward and challenge anti-immigrant expressions’ (Dagrunn, field notes, June 2015). In other words, although a particular project group had not recruited the most troublesome youths at school, it was believed that this group of young people could still be influenced through those who did participate in the programme.

An objection to relying on the ambassador perspective, and thus relations among peers, is that it places a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of young people to prevent racism and extremism. ‘The point of working with this model is to work directly with the intolerant or troublemakers’ (Anna, field notes, June 2016). What Anna was referring to was the project groups that had not successfully recruited the most troublesome ‘at-risk’ youth, as the philosophy of the programme initially states. Anna was not the only one who challenged the idea that that peer group influence

should be the main purpose of the programme. In fact, once the school year came to an end, it was decided by the municipality board not to continue with a new project group in Glimmerdagg the following school year. Instead, the money allocated for it would be spent in ways that would directly benefit all participants at the school and not just a selected group (Local TP meeting, May 2016).

Regardless of whether the project had captured the most intolerant young people or not, according to the headmaster at Glimmerdagg, it had already improved the school climate (Iben, field notes, February 2016). Before the programme started, a group of girls at the school had expressed concern about a particular group of boys who were showing intolerant attitudes towards some of the newly arrived refugees at school. It was partly this concern that had led to the decision to implement the programme. This corresponds to the point about using peers as intervention allies. Simultaneously, Iben noted that she had to explain to the girls who wanted the boys expelled, that this was not going to be the solution. This indicates an idea about prevention that does not only concern the most troublesome youth. Apparent contempt for those who are sceptical or hostile towards immigration might only contribute to the ongoing polarization concerning immigration in Sweden. In other words, the philosophy is that there are lessons to be learnt for both intolerant and tolerant young people.

Limitations

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in a particular region and participation in one project group. My relationship with the subjects of study was that of researcher and interlocutor, and the analysis is mainly based on their individual stories and my interpretation. There are several other experienced tolerance educators that I have not talked to, and, during the last four years, new project groups have started up all across the country. Although all tolerance educators undergo the same training and relate to the same instruction book written by Mattsson and Adler (2012), each course is based on a local problem analysis and shaped by the specific course leaders' own personality and social experience. My participation in the regional meetings, however, reveals that the practical challenges regarding the recruitment of the most 'at-risk' youth seem to be a general issue, and thus the potential for immediate peer group influence.

Discussion: Identifying the Tensions

Although the Swedish TP is a well-established programme that has been operating for 20 years, this study, which is the first of its kind, reveals some tensions concerning how, and by whom, prevention of racism and extremism should be done. In theory, the programme is based on thorough mapping of the target group, mixing these 'at-risk' youth with other young people, breaking up negative constellations at school, create new relations and promote democratic values (Mattsson, 2013). Inherent in this is the notion that peers are especially important during adolescence (Frønes, 1995). The TP is thus in line with studies suggesting that young people can be useful preventive agents (Miller-Johnson & Costanzo, 2004; Williams et al., 2015). In practice, the idea of targeting 'at-risk' youth and relaying on peer group influence, poses a number of questions.

Recruiting young people from a specific target group has proven to be challenging, especially when doing it for the first time. There was a certain ambivalence surrounding each implementation of the programme that indicates a need to clarify what kind of preventive programme the TP should be, general or targeted. As noted, the tolerance educators also operated with a broad understanding of what racism and intolerance is, and thus what is exactly to be prevented, from youth delinquency to everyday racism (Skiple, 2018).

The programme seemed to work well for those young people who were not perceived to be at risk of radicalization, by increasing their confidence and knowledge about the Holocaust, as well as improving their overall democratic preparedness. My findings suggest that the challenge of recruiting the most 'at-risk' youth was partly resolved with a broad understanding of the socialization mechanisms and with the goal of improving young people's relationships in various social contexts. The environment at home was perceived to be improved by the educators facilitating dialogue on democratic issues between young people and their parents. While parents were expected to provide emotional support to their children and take an active part in the course, either through written assignments or in discussions, parents were sometimes regarded as part of the problem. Although not explicitly mentioned as an objective of the programme, this indicated an assumption that young people could influence their parent's level of tolerance. The tolerance educators likewise perceived some of the other teachers at school as part of the problem. In this particular case, the problem was two strands of opinion when it came to the newly arrived refugees (Skiple, 2018).

It was not discussed by the tolerance educators whether they paid adequate attention to people's genuine concerns about immigration. The main assumption, in my material, was that the course leads to an improvement of the environment at school in terms of anti-immigrant sentiments and social unrest, by having a trained group of educators on site, as well as creating ambassadors of tolerance among the pupils. In that way, the programme promoted access to pro-social contexts not only for the participants but also for everyone at the school, including the staff. The emphasis of young people as intervention allies challenges the idea that prevention is mostly something that is done *by* adults *on* young people.

Expecting those who participate in the TP to be intervention allies, however, place a lot of responsibility on these young people. The main tension in my material was the somewhat opposing ideas of Anna and Henrik, concerning the specific participants in the programme, and thus the overall purpose. Should it be for the most intolerant 'at-risk' youth, and thus those with the biggest potential to change in a positive direction, or should it be for the most motivated ones, and thus those with the biggest potential to influence their surroundings and become intervention allies? According to the latter version, the course would slowly lose its significance as a targeted preventive initiative. During the regional TP meetings, it became evident that all the ongoing projects had experienced problems recruiting the most intolerant young people. It was often explained as a result of it being the first year the particular schools had tried it out, and once the programme was an established and known course, the educators would get better at attracting the young people they thought would benefit the most. At the same time, a majority of the educators seemed to believe in the notion of peer group influence, as they said that they had recruited friends of the core target group. This idea was based on the assumption

that friends of the target group could influence these youths after participating in the course. The experience of the tolerance educators who had kept in touch with some of the participants from previous courses contributed to this assumption. It was, for example, noted that many former TP participants had committed themselves to pro-social activity in the local community, such as engaging in the local youth club or devoting themselves to volunteer work. In this way, it was believed that these young people could function as preventive resources beyond the school context as well.

Based on the above-mentioned tensions, a recommendation for further research is to examine whether young people who have participated in the TP influence their parents and peers in a more positive direction (towards democracy and away from racism and extremism) than young people who have not participated in the programme. This must be examined over a longer time period, when the former TP participants are left to themselves, without the immediate encouragement and support of the tolerance educators. An alternative hypothesis is that those who act as ‘ambassadors of tolerance’ would do so regardless of their participation in the course, as the topics interested them beforehand.

To conclude, the philosophy and the practice of the TP suggest that significant others, and especially peers, are important for preventing extremism, and that prevention is something that is going on in many socialization arenas. Since everyone can be someone’s significant other that implies that we are all potential preventive agents.

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