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Citizenship to (counter)terrorism: the need to de-securitise the Norwegian education system and create space for democratic resilience

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Abstract

Education for citizenship has been the subject of growing policy and research attention since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet, alongside conventional assumptions that school can help young learners develop socio-political attitudes that support democratic attitudes and behaviours, there are growing political expectations that educators will actively prevent terrorism. In Norway, these expectations have had implications for educational policy, as the objective of preventing terrorism was securitised into the curriculum in 2020. In this article, we scrutinise security governance in the Norwegian educational domain and examine how precautionary counterterrorism

logic can cause harmful and exclusionary pedagogical practices. Through a detailed qualitative research, we demonstrate that pedagogical practices emphasising democratic resilience could be a promising approach to counter conflict, extremism and violence. Additionally, it is our contention that democratic resilience may also have a de-securitising effect by allowing for peacebuilding to be carried out within the normal rules and regulations of democratic education. In this regard, de-securitisation can allow for mobilising students for peaceful and democratic ends in and beyond education.

Keywords securitisation; terrorism; citizenship education; relational pedagogy; democratic resilience

Introduction

Societal demands for security from threats of extreme violence and terrorism have become a dominant feature of contemporary life. Through a rationale of normalising counterterrorism, security governance is extended from the centralised state to localised social fields. Based on this rationale, frontline workers, including but not limited to teachers, are believed well placed to identify and intervene in radicalisation processes. Security governance in educational systems has become something of a cottage industry in recent years. In the securitisation of education, teachers have increasingly found themselves serving as actors and enactors of homeland security (Sjøen and Jore, 2019).

The political argument that education can serve security interests is saturated with controversy. Research suggests that the precautionary logic of counterterrorism can have a chilling effect on pedagogical practices (O'Donnell, 2017). One particular concern is how securitisation processes are linked with the implementation of pre-crime policing. Pre-crime policing entails acting on suspicion without the need for charge, prosecution or conviction. Members of minority populations often find themselves framed as suspects of so-called crimes that have not yet been committed. In a pedagogical sense, this is problematic, not least as it implies the possible reformulation of safeguarding practices from tools that conventionally ensure the well-being of students to, increasingly, those that protect society from the perceived threat posed by students (Sieckelinck et al., 2015).

In Norway, these discussions have impacted security and educational policy. As concerns the former, an expanding set of security policy documents details the role of practitioners in societal efforts to prevent radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism (Jore, 2020). These preventive efforts, which are commonly termed 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) or 'countering violent extremism' (CVE), have become marked features across Europe (Sjøen, 2021). However, in Norway in particular, the so-called *security–education nexus* has arguably reached a new stage, as expectations that schools should contribute to the efforts to prevent terrorism was written into a newly released curriculum: 'Social studies must help students to participate in and further develop democracy and to prevent extreme attitudes, extreme behaviours, and terrorism' (Directorate of Education, 2020, p. 4, our translation).

This *performative securitisation* move can be seen as reconfiguring Norwegian educational policy in the realm of homeland security. When issues become securitised, exceptional means are used and democratic rules can be broken (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998). In contrast to the emergency mode generated by securitisation, Buzan et al. (1998) call for the need for 'de-securitisation' (p. 4), where perceived threats can be dealt with in the normal socio-political realm guided by democratic conversation and rules. However, curricular responses to preventing terrorism have received limited scrutiny or discussion in Norway (Sjøen and Mattsson, 2022).

In this article, we explore a series of conflict-transforming practices in a Norwegian secondary school. Our study is limited to a focus on social pedagogy as a form of educational practice (Janer and Úcar, 2017). Furthermore, we rely on Biesta and Miedema's (2002, p. 174) conceptualisation of pedagogy as reflecting transformative dimensions of education that is different from 'training' or 'instruction'. Pedagogy in our understanding is concerned about the purposes of education including democratic participation, social inclusion and subjectification towards becoming autonomous and independent human beings. Many terms are used in the literature to describe this, including student-centred pedagogy, liberal pedagogy,

relational pedagogy and progressive pedagogy (Sjøen, 2020). A plethora of terms are also reflected in this study to maintain a varied language. When called for, terms that are more precise are used to highlight important issues.

Drawing from a research project aimed at de-escalating violence and conflict between migrant and non-migrant youth in a local community (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021), we highlight how teachers can create a space for students to engage in democratic dialogue and active citizenship for the purpose of conflict transformation. A key finding is that the students described developing democratic resilience through analysing and influencing representations of the cultural 'other', active citizenship and cross-cultural community building. It is our contention that this may have served to reduce conflict and violence in and beyond school. Aiming to move away from further securitisation of education, we suggest that de-emphasising precautionary and pre-crime policing in school can facilitate democratic resilience in educational contexts.

The security–education nexus

Scholars will often remind us that the relationship between education and security has long attracted societal attention (Østby and Urdal, 2010). The peacebuilding functions of education have engaged political theorists since at least Aristotle. Traditionally, education as peacebuilding relates to how schools can reduce cultural and political grievance and create opportunities for social mobilisation. Thus, the civic virtue of education is assumed to be a powerful antidote to extreme attitudes and behaviours. However, education also has a complex relationship with security governance, as educators across continents commonly report an increased expectation that they will appraise their students through a security lens (Sjøen and Jore, 2019).

The securitisation of education is depicted less as a recent phenomenon than the evolution of educational practices across continents. For instance, in American schools, teachers and students have been engaged in security measures for decades (Borum et al., 2010). While arguments concerning the governance of security in American schools are based on the premise of helping students and their families feel safe, Peguero et al. (2015) claim that it is more likely experienced as a form of surveillance and control. Thus, the security–education nexus has its own distinctive features, which require further scrutiny.

Security governance remains a key characteristic of contemporary living. Currently, terrorism is framed as an existential threat, while efforts to prevent it have been reconfigured from a state responsibility to a moral obligation on all citizens in Norway (Jore, 2020). Sociologically, this is reflected through notions of *risk society*, where growing attention to risk and threat are embedded throughout every aspects of contemporary social life (Beck, 1992). Moreover, a growing focus on risk and threat can be placed within the broader performative context of *neoliberalism*, which redistributes traditional governmental tasks onto public life. Neoliberalism, where the individual's choices are made the locus of control and regulations, is believed to be integral to the contemporary securitisation of education (Durodié, 2016).

From a security governance perspective, it is argued that both neoliberalism and counterterrorism extend from a place of control. Larsson (2016) related this notion of control to the normalisation of *vigilant surveillance*, which entails the observing and reporting of suspicious, radical or oppositional behaviours. Moreover, security governance is often rooted in political absolutism, as if the term 'security' has had a singular meaning that cannot be contested (Davies, 2008). Consequently, security governance is not only a means of carrying out the assessment and management of risks but also processes through which implicit and explicit political ideology is normalised in society. Critical analysis is therefore needed of the topic of bringing security into the pedagogical world of qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

Larsson (2016) demonstrates how the implementation of security measures may create insecurity for others. In democratic societies, we cannot enjoy security when it comes at the cost of another's human security (Lindahl, 2020). For Larsson (2016), this tension illustrates the tipping point of (in)security in social life. This tipping point is characterised by a tension between the normal, which is worthy of protection, and the abnormal, which is subject to exclusion and stigmatisation. Highlighting this tension helps to reveal the paradoxical nature of security governance: counterterrorism, although intended to protect society, may reinforce cultures of suspicion, conflict and exclusion. In other words, security can also add to insecurity. Furthermore, there is a need to scrutinise the normalisation of counterterrorism

as security governance in schools, as vigilant surveillance does not necessarily prevent the development of extremist attitudes among students but merely silences it (Davies, 2008; Sieckelinck et al., 2015).

In Norway, limited research has emerged from the educational system on these matters. The first contemporary exploration was presented in Lid et al.'s (2016) study. They revealed that school staff are considered to be among the most important preventive actors in society, that teachers are ideally positioned to identify extremist students and that schools refer most cases of concern to the police and security services. The first in-depth study on security governance in the Norwegian educational system was carried out by Sjøen (2020), who argued that the securitisation paradigm that drives prevention efforts risks undermining emancipatory, inclusive and democratic education in Norwegian pedagogical environments.

There is, however, reason to believe that education can play a crucial role in helping young people unlearn, or disengage from, violence and extremism if school staff use relational pedagogy in response to any growing concern that students may be in the process of being radicalised. In fact, an assessment of the literature indicates that preventing extreme attitudes and behaviours is closely linked to the use of relational and inclusive pedagogics (Sjøen and Jore, 2019). This finding suggests that (potential) extremist students should ideally be met with care, inclusion, tolerance and, of course, constructive criticism, a claim which has been expressed in previous research (Davies, 2014; Sieckelinck et al., 2015). *Relationality* – a term intrinsically linked with subjectification and emancipation of students – can be used to understand these functions (Biesta, 2013). Relationality in this sense is compatible with the purposes, functions and objectives of Norwegian social pedagogy (Stephens, 2009).

Meeting intolerance with increased tolerance is no small undertaking. Nevertheless, research in Norway shows that there is a concerning link between students who lack relationality with peers or teachers, or who are exposed to stigmatisation or harassment, and their subsequent support for or defence of the use of extreme violence (Vestel and Bakken, 2016). Consequently, given how exclusionary experiences may cause or reinforce support for extremism, society must also contemplate how to mitigate social exclusion through inclusive relations. Teachers should therefore engage with (potential) extremist students with support, tolerance and care in an attempt to deal with the root causes that can lead them towards violent behaviours.

Democratic resilience against violent extremism

Much of the scholarly literature describes preventing radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism in terms of safeguarding democracy through citizenship education (Quartermaine, 2016). By dividing safeguarding into four overlapping categories, Davies (2016) explained how PVE in school could be structured around the ideals of inclusivity, encounters with difference, active citizenship and critical thinking. Typically, steering students away from extremism aligns with how teachers describe their understanding of safeguarding responsibilities (Busher et al., 2017). This notion of safeguarding can therefore be seen as a continuation of existing pedagogical practices in many democratic societies. As O'Donnell (2017) claimed, teachers took their responsibility of pastoral care and safeguarding seriously long before schools were instructed to prevent extremism and terrorism in the post-9/11 era.

Yet, as discussed, many authors have criticised the justification of applying safeguarding practices under the banner of counterterrorism, as this transformation may legitimise the process of subjecting students to security interventions (Sjøen, 2021). Inherent in securitisation processes is the gradual acceptance and normalisation of counterterrorism measures such as profiling, surveillance and zero-tolerance strategies. However, as O'Donnell (2017) claimed, by not using terms such as 'surveillance' or 'profiling' directly, but, rather, as attempts to ensure psychological well-being, counterterrorism can be presented as safeguarding. This is what Lindahl (2020) would describe as *negative counterterrorism*, denoting different security practices that may create pressure on teachers to repress critical, radical and politically engaged students, ultimately obstructing their agency, safety and emancipation.

A more holistic and relational way of approaching the prevention of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism in education is arguably found in inclusive and supportive relations between teacher and student. As noted, there is evidence that pedagogical inclusion, tolerance and constructive criticism can be valuable preventive measures (Sjøen, 2020). However, it is not only (potential) extremist students who express these sentiments, as students and teachers tend to describe how attempts to prevent anti-social or anti-democratic phenomena may be more successful if they are based on student-centred

pedagogical activities (Sjøen and Jore, 2019; Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022). Here, it is worth noting that educational efforts to prevent radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism cannot be limited to what happens in formal education, as research has highlighted the importance of community building and dialogue beyond the formal boundaries of schools, for instance, by including families and civic actors in preventive engagement (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021). This does not mean, however, that education cannot do anything or does not have an important role to play in preventing or reducing societal enmity and violence. Professionals tasked with pedagogical functions can be among the resources deployed by policy makers to address extremism, conflict and violence in society (Úcar, 2016).

We believe that student-centred pedagogics and local community initiatives are not only viable strategies for reducing or preventing anti-social and anti-democratic phenomena, but also the best option of doing so while enhancing students' well-being and emancipation. This is what we term 'democratic resilience', which, in this context, refers to different actions or interventions that focus on what enables people, groups and communities to refrain or disengage from violence, conflict and extremism. In short, resilience implies approaches focusing on what makes people resistant to violence, rather than what makes them vulnerable to it. Resilience can thus be interpreted as a range of strengths and resources enabling core functioning to be maintained when there are challenges arising from violent extremism and terrorism or from excessive securitisation governance from these threats (Stephens and Sieckelinck, 2020).

Resilience tends to be portrayed as an individual capacity, yet it is crucial to acknowledge social contexts in which resilience can be demonstrated, rather than only seeking resilient individuals (Stephens and Sieckelinck, 2020). Hence, resilience can be seen as a form of transformation or democratisation where people build capacity not only to counter conflict and violence, but also to empower communities to take action to address their social needs. This, we argue, aligns with the conflict-transforming ideals of social pedagogy as a professional practice, which is aimed at reducing both conflict and the structures that it sustains and is sustained by (Janer and Úcar, 2017; Stephens, 2009).

Research project and methodology

This study grew from a qualitative research project in which one of the authors worked as an upper-secondary school teacher (see also Skotnes and Ringrose, forthcoming; Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022; Svendsen et al., 2021). The data were collected partly in relation to a wider research project on education and migration with a majority-inclusive approach, funded by the Research Council of Norway. The project was structured according to a design-based research, which is a formative methodology that seeks to construct learning experiences (Barab and Squire, 2004). While the study reported on in this article draws inspiration from the wider design-based project, it is more accurate to characterise this particular research as an exploration of peace-building interventions carried out in a Norwegian upper-secondary school.

The local community in which the upper-secondary school was located had been afflicted by conflict between migrant and non-migrant youth groups. This conflict had resulted in sporadic cases of violence and racism. It is worth noting that these violent events never reached a level of severe physical injury. However, it was evident that the events were serious enough in terms of how they affected community cohesion and attitudes towards immigrants in the local community (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021). Moreover, these incidents generated negative media attention and, in particular, a negative representation of refugees, which seemed to fuel the hostilities between immigrants and the host community. As societal fears increased regarding the symbiotic relationship of conflict between migrant and non-migrant groups, worries of cumulative extremism ensued. *Cumulative extremism* is understood as different conflictual narratives feeding into one another and potentially increasing hostility and violence (Crawford et al., 2018).

A caveat is appropriate here, as the adolescents involved in the conflict were not associated with any known extremist milieus. However, youth extremism is currently so broad in meaning that it includes just about any anti-social phenomenon, ranging from binge drinking through youth crime to terrorism (Davydov, 2015). It is therefore more precise to describe these hostilities as cases of youthful revolt rather than violent extremism (Pedersen et al., 2018).

To respond to the challenge of conflict and violence, teachers, students and researchers at an upper-secondary school designed an educational intervention aimed at mitigating the hostilities and reducing fear of extremism in the community. These interventions are described in greater detail in the 'Findings' section. The educational intervention was structured as citizenship education through pedagogical activities, including dialogue, cross-cultural meetings and community building. More specifically, the students were asked to analyse and influence the representation of this conflict in local media. The students also initiated community meetings at which they facilitated cross-cultural interactions between migrant and non-migrant citizens. These choices were made and legitimised through the students' belief and ability to engage in meeting places for cross-cultural communication.

The project was initiated by exploring and reviewing literature on citizenship, integration and conflict transformation, which is reflected in the literary backdrop in this article. This serves as the first iteration in which a literature review was conducted with the purpose of identifying possible interventions (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012). Following this, teachers, students and researchers were invited to identify challenges and potential in citizenship education with regard to issues such as migration, integration and conflict transformation. Two classes of upper-secondary students participated in the project. The educational intervention was designed around the following themes: deliberations and representation of cultural differences and engagement with such differences. The interventions in the project were implemented in different iterations, while attempts were made to maintain a dynamic approach by continuously improving and altering design and implementation based on recommendations and experience (Barab and Squire, 2004).

Overview of the project

The corpus constituting the data for analysis consisted of semi-structured interviews with students and individuals who had been directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. The analyses are also based on participant observation in school-based interventions. Four focus group interviews were carried out as part of the wider project, which provided data for this study, and were analysed along with data from the three semi-structured interviews conducted at different stages of the project. The students in the semi-structured interviews were 19 years old. The focus group interviews consisted of four to six students between the ages of 16 and 18, strategically sampled based on age in order to fit the curricular aims of the project. We included students with and without a migrant background in the data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes. An interview guide was used, but the informants were given the opportunity to discuss other issues. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by one investigator and transcribed by another, but the content of the transcripts was analysed by several investigators. The focus group interviews were conducted by a group consisting of teachers and researchers and analysed as part of the project development. We have anonymised and deleted raw data as required by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The group interviews were mainly based on the students piloting and commenting on different aspects of an educational resource under production in parallel and in relation to the project on which this study focuses. Approval was obtained from the Norwegian Research Council, and all participants received oral and written information about the project and consented to participate. The scale and nature of this research project restricts the impact of our findings. Further, findings from this project may not be generalisable to other pedagogical contexts, as they are based on a limited range of empirical data that are open to different interpretations.

Data analysis for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews was ongoing, as required by the different iterative cycles of the project. We applied a pragmatic eclectic approach by identifying, analysing and describing patterns in our material (Barab and Squire, 2004). First, this approach involved identifying codes and categories in textual content, which is a pragmatic process in which certain codes are prioritised over others. Second, we analysed beyond these codes and categories by identifying general themes and patterns by drawing attention to how citizenship education can reduce conflict and facilitate cross-cultural integration. Two broad themes emerged in the analysis, based on the different iterations in the project, which are emphatic narratives and engagement through community building.

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Findings

In the following, we present our findings, based on two themes: emphatic narratives in times of hostilities; and conflict transformation through community building. Thereafter, we discuss these findings in the light of how perspective taking and community building may contribute towards democratic resilience, while also having a de-securitising effect in and beyond education.

Looking at the sides of the conflict: emphatic narratives in times of hostilities

The first pedagogical intervention in this project involved having students analyse and influence media representations of the conflict. The media representation was considered by many to be a mediating factor in the conflict, and as one participating student noted: 'We felt that the entire attitude of society was at stake in a way. And we felt that we have a responsibility to do something about this situation.'

The students were asked to scrutinise different newspaper articles covering the hostilities between migrant and non-migrant youth groups. Here, the pedagogical activities were all structured around the ideals of encounters with cultural differences, active citizenship and critical thinking (Davies, 2016). This iteration was primarily aimed at exploring cultural representations, particularly negative consequences of single-narrative representations in the media, while contributing by promoting multiple perspectives. This activity was grounded in two specific curricular aims in upper-secondary schooling, which are to 'discuss and elaborate on the causes of prejudice, racism and discrimination and what measures can counteract these' (Directorate of Education, 2013, p. 12) and to 'explore different brief historical representations of one event and discuss the authors' choice of approach and question' (Directorate of Education, 2006, p. 5, our translation).

A range of newspaper articles was published covering the conflict that troubled the local community. One article contained an interview with the local police chief entitled 'Youth gang in the community creates social fear'. Additional headlines stated that '[Children] are scared to walk to school because of youth violence' (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021). While the influence of the media on such matters is a contested area (Jore, 2016), its coverage tends to portray radicalised youth as, at best, having gone morally astray and, at worst, pure evil (Sieckelinck et al., 2015). In any case, the sensationalisation of youth violence was substantiated across local politics, as well as in the media and public life. Subsequently, fear of cumulative extremism heightened, with the results that groups of people even formed what can be described as civil protection groups. These groups would, in some cases, track, harass and use violence against the migrant youth in question (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021).

As a response to the negative attention directed towards immigrant youth, a group of young migrants felt that their side of the story remained untold in the media and in social life (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021). One of the youth who had been involved in the conflict noted that: 'certain people have already made up their own opinions. Some will automatically be negative towards immigrants.'

Media analysis in Norway reveals that individuals linked with extremism are predominantly represented as threats and criminals to be dealt with in the judicial system (Larsen, 2019). This was also the case in the media representation in the local community. Another student explained that attention towards cultural and religious features was often related to 'youth gang violence'. All of the students agreed that this was not a nuanced representation of immigrant youth, and one student claimed that, as a consequence: 'Most Norwegian men and women do not have a clear picture of what it means being a minority member of society.'

Motivated by a need to tell their version of the narrative and provide an explanation of their involvement in the hostilities with non-migrant youth, a newspaper published an article highlighting the experiences of these young men entitled: 'He told us to go home and be ashamed of ourselves, and then he spat on us'. Accompanying the title was a picture of five young immigrants with their backs turned to the photographer (and metaphorically also to society) with the caption '[The five young boys] believe that exclusionary experiences are detrimental to community cohesion'. The article went on to describe how the five young men wanted to take the first step towards conflict transformation and social reconciliation before the hostilities escalated any further (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021).

Students from the two classes who participated in this research project were given paper handouts of these and other newspaper articles along with questions prepared by the teacher asking 'what

message is the article attempting to communicate?' and 'do you think the article serves its intended purpose?' One student noted that: 'The media does not give much ethical thought ... They just publish. On the one hand, it is positive that they do not repress opinions, but I would not praise the media for how they represent these issues.'

The students were also asked whether they thought that the picture of the young men facing away from the photographer would affect the article's intended message of social inclusion. At this stage, the students were encouraged to recognise and analyse non-linguistic elements and how they may affect media representations. Several of the students noted that this picture was not suitable if the overarching purpose of the journalist had been to achieve empathy and tolerance. Discussions ensued among the students to the effect that, while the intended purpose of some articles might have been to reduce the hostilities, stereotypical forms of representation seemed to exacerbate conflictual narratives. One student noted that 'We do not think that youth behave like they are portrayed in the media'. The students also problematised the media's and journalists' responsibility when publishing news involving underaged individuals who were involved in conflict and violence.

After scrutinising the articles, many students concluded that media representations were not balanced, but conflicting and even contradictory. Although several of the newspaper articles suggested that social cohesion might reduce conflict, the students also discovered widespread images of 'us and them' in the media representation. As Ford (2019) wrote, media representation of extremism and terrorism tends to operate through the production of dichotomous structures that install discursive hierarchies. The operation of dichotomous structures does not require awareness or malice (Gullestad, 2004). However, the fact that media intentions are not negative does not mean they are necessarily positive. While analysing these representations, relationality manifested among some students, who discovered, to their own surprise, that they are morally accountable for how immigrant citizens are represented and treated in society. One student noted: 'First and foremost, we did this [project] to show that we want to participate in preventing what is happening ... Later, it became more important to create discussion and gain better understanding of issues concerning inclusion and integration.'

Moving beyond the dichotomous structures in media representation, the discussion among the students turned towards the existence of implicit assumptions and how these representations are closely linked with social power. In any social domain, powerful groups will struggle to maintain or alter how social phenomena are represented and, in this iteration of the project, the students discussed how media representations could be used to influence the social perceptions of immigrants and therefore the conditions for successful integration. In this process, the students noted that they became increasingly aware of themselves, their role in society, and how the treatment of immigrants affected them. The teacher served the role of active facilitator in the process of analysing media representation. However, the students were encouraged to make qualified judgements of media representations themselves, rather than being directed towards certain opinions.

A central tenet in this activity was that it should allow for transformative learning. While the students earlier in the project had written to an imagined other (a newly arrived immigrant) in a letter-writing workshop, in this later stage of the study they analysed media stories involving people they knew. Something real was at stake, which is important for pedagogical interventions to foster transformative learning (Todd, 2015). In particular, the students were challenged to recognise and reflect on subjective cultural perspectives, including one's own, and develop their ability to interact sensitively across cultural boundaries. This engagement encouraged the students to move from reflection to action. In particular, the students were stimulated to approach different local media channels in an attempt to bring nuance to the single authoritative narrative that had dominated local newspaper articles. Under titles such as '[We] will combat xenophobia' and 'We have open hearts, and where there are open hearts, space is never lacking', the students provided more emphatic descriptions of immigrant youth, their experience of exclusion and inequality and the importance of tolerance and inclusion (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021).

These activities, which occurred both inside and outside formal schooling, were initiated as a first step towards strengthening cohesion in the local community. Yet, for some of the students, writing newspaper articles was not sufficient, as they felt a need for more transformational actions. One participant noted: 'Our intention is [to reach] the ordinary citizens who may not have a sound picture of the conflict. [We want] to create a good social environment, a good place to live for everyone.' Thus, the students arranged a meeting with school management, local politicians and members of civil society, which marked the next iteration of the research project.

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Conflict transformation through cross-cultural engagement

Motivated by the need for further action, the students planned a community meeting addressing issues of integration and cohesion. In this process, they also invited residents in the local community to an 'open mosque' for dialogue. According to Goldberg (2014), critical and emphatic engagement with different others is more likely to decrease hostilities and increase interest between out-groups in society. The students had learned that immigrant youths lacked formal meeting places in the community. Interviews with young immigrants involved in the hostilities also revealed that their psychosocial needs were rarely known to local citizens; thus, human security was not guaranteed for all members of society (Lindahl, 2020). Moreover, the dominant narrative regarding the cause of these hostilities predominantly revolved around the perceived failure of immigrant citizens to internalise Western values or integrate into society. One of the participating students described that: 'We should attempt to affect these perceptions so that we prevent prejudice in the local community.'

Consequently, the dominant narrative of immigration in the local community resembled one of assimilation more than inclusion. As explained by another student: 'There are few attempts of mutual understanding.' This illuminates the importance of social pedagogical approaches to ensure that every student has the right to inclusion and dignity in society (Stephens, 2009). Yet, as Gullestad (2002) notes, immigrants are often blamed for the social problems they encounter. Concerning phenomena such as youth violence and extremism, security governance also tends to divert attention from the structural reasons for which people commit violence. However, if the structural reasons driving violent behaviours are disregarded, the underlying structures may continue to enable people to commit violence and engage in conflict (Mattsson, 2018). For Stephens and Sieckelinck (2020), if structural conditions in society are neglected, there is also the risk of

> overlooking, or indeed rejecting, underlying questions or criticism of young people that are harnessed by these narratives. If critical attention is given only to dismantling extremist narratives, and not to addressing criticisms of the prevailing social order, such as the dominance of materialist perspectives, institutional discrimination and unjust social practices, or the changing face and norms of society, then resilience is reduced to an uncritical acceptance of society as it is. (p. 151)

Learning about these suppressed narratives, students in the project felt a responsibility not only for those directly involved in the violence and conflict, but also for minority members of the community. Invitations to a community meeting were therefore published in local media, and influential groups, including politicians and members of faith communities, were encouraged to participate. The purpose was described as building bridges across cultural backgrounds and fostering successful integration and inclusion in the community. Ideally, creating a common meeting ground could contribute towards democratic resilience by allowing both migrant and non-migrant citizens to share their problems, tailor solutions to local conditions and mobilise collectively.

Present at the meeting were politicians, practitioners and migrant and non-migrant citizens, as well as the parish priest and representatives from the local Islamic centre. This meeting was, in many ways, the culmination of the intervening work carried out by students to reach a bigger segment of the community. Creating space for engagement in this way can also invite self-transformation, and this proved to be a powerful strategy for stimulating active citizenship among the students. However, for individuals primarily raised in monocultural settings, having access principally to their own cultural worldviews can hinder the ability to construe differences between their own perceptions and those of people who are culturally different. One participant noted that: 'We did receive some critical questions from people in which we answered to the best of our knowledge. The mayor was also present and engaged. He raised several questions and supported us, which had a positive effect.' During the community meeting, the narratives of minority citizens contributed towards opening up multiple perspectives for both students and community members. Gradually, this provided the students with a more sophisticated understanding of how issues such as migration, inclusion and exclusion were experienced by minority members of the community.

Through this cross-cultural engagement, migrant citizens successfully challenged the dominant narrative, in which immigrants had been portrayed as either violent gang members or vulnerable individuals who had experienced traumatic migration experiences (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021). Thus,

the migrant citizens expanded on hegemonic and stereotypical perspectives by speaking of their everyday life prior to arriving in Norway. This communication helped to show that their identity was more than, for instance, being a refugee from a poverty-stricken or war-torn country. Engagement with cultural differences sparked an interest between out-groups, as emphatic discussions ensued across these cultural differences. The hostilities also seemed to de-escalate as critical and emphatic engagement with out-groups increased. One participant described how the meeting was appropriate for clearing 'any cultural misunderstanding'. Hence, the more nuanced understanding of the cultural 'other' was vital in strengthening cohesion and diminishing stereotypes and conflict by the subjectification of fellow human beings (Biesta, 2013).

Creating transformative spaces in and beyond pedagogical environments included efforts to educate students as citizens in a democratic society in which there is rational deliberation over politics, dialogue between cross-cultural perspectives and so on (Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022). By enabling insight into other cultural perspectives and allowing time for reflection on such perspectives, the teacher stimulated solidarity within and across people and within the local community. Both migrant and non-migrant citizens noted that the community meeting had sparked new arenas for cross-cultural communication. These meetings were described as downscaling the conflict levels by those directly affected in the community, while also increasing cross-cultural engagement (Skotnes and Ringrose, 2021; Svendsen et al., 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

Although the conflict selected for analysis in this article represents 'atypical' events insofar as few migrant and non-migrant citizens were involved in them, the hostile tendencies mirror broader concerns of polarisation and conflict between sections of the population. When also considering how exclusion, stigmatisation and prejudice can be factors underlying radicalisation processes, questions concerning how to reduce or prevent such experiences should be given high priority in democratic societies. Naturally, this is not a responsibility that educational systems can carry on their own. In fact, we are tempted to claim that formal education has a limited effect on preventing social problems of this magnitude. Here, it is also important to be explicit about the preventive role of social pedagogical safeguarding practices, which are sometimes referred to as being outside the standardised educational framework (Úcar, 2016).

The examples in this study illustrate how safeguarding through democratic engagement can stimulate active citizenship among young citizens. Centred on the social inclusion of young people, the pedagogical interventions implemented here focused on civic engagement, encounters with cultural differences, community development, scrutinising social representations in media and moral exploration of exclusionary experiences (Davies, 2016; Goldberg, 2014). However, the overarching aim was always intended to be relational in that it entailed pedagogical acts with subjects or addressed the subjectification of people who may suffer various obstacles deriving from social complexity. For Biesta (2013), subjectification is emancipation through relations. In this notion, the subject is placed at the centre, with equity and freedom being the starting point of the emancipatory process. Central to this notion is that emancipatory social pedagogy is the consciousness of what subjects can do when they consider themselves equal to any other and consider any other as being equal to themselves (Sjøen, 2020; Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022). Subjectification in social pedagogical practice always comes with the chance that differences will be exacerbated. Yet, unlike extremism and violent conflict, relationality is not about winning or losing; rather, it is about ways of relating in which justice can be done to all who take part (Biesta, 2013; Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022).

Maintaining a commitment to subjectification further marks the shift from focusing on vulnerability factors of radicalisation to exploring what keeps people resistant to extreme violence. While safeguarding vulnerability is conducive to conventional social pedagogical practice, vulnerability approaches to PVE have, according to O'Donnell (2016), produced inconclusive results. Moreover, vulnerability approaches can imply that something is wrong with so-called vulnerable students, which is a disparaging view of young change makers. In the words of Úcar (2016), what characterises social pedagogy today should therefore be less working with 'vulnerable people' and more interacting with people, whether individually or collectively, who live in highly complex sociocultural contexts. Such transformation may provide an alternative to the vulnerability-oriented perspective under which

individuals who do not conform to the ideal image of citizens risk being subjected to control and surveillance.

Democratic resilience can therefore involve a form of transformation which may guide the process of societal and political democratisation. The research field suggests that social capital, trust and connectedness are the building blocks of democratic resilience (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021; Stephens and Sieckelinck, 2020). In our study, the facilitation of trust-based relationships was of the utmost importance, not only because it enabled a more prosocial approach to PVE, but also by inspiring an agenda that diverges from the security-driven perspective. The web of social interactions generated by the relationship between students, school staff and local citizens constitutes a strategy to foster empowerment processes and personal autonomy (Melendro et al., 2016).

What is the role of the social educator in safeguarding students from conflict and violence? Compatible with the research literature (Svendsen and Skotnes, 2022), this study suggests a need to use student-centred and inclusive pedagogics to increase moral responsiveness among students. When safeguarding individuals affected by or involved in conflict, relational and pedagogics appear necessary to transform the situation for those affected by hostilities. Such transformation also requires that the target audience and other stakeholders be integrated in decision-making processes aimed at overcoming situations of conflict and social exclusion (Melendro et al., 2016). This approach warrants constant interaction between action and reflection for those involved, so that students can critically explore their own thoughts and values and compare them with those of their peers.

Growing uncertainties in contemporary social living can create or reinforce conflictual representations of the cultural other, leading to heightened fear, anxiety and conflict. The above discussions have attempted to illustrate how relational pedagogy and citizenship education can transform conflict in and beyond the formal boundaries of schools. More sophisticated use of social pedagogy recognises that cultural contact needs to take place in a relational and inclusive environment and be oriented towards the achievement of democratic resilience.

The educational implications of our study point in two broad directions. The first is that conflict-transforming activities require active participation, from planning through the execution of peace-building measures. It is important to promote tolerance of difference and highlight how multiple perspectives can create a sense of belonging for all members of society. Second, it is important to understand that an emphasis on education does not imply an overall dismissal of security issues (Sieckelinck et al., 2015). While relational pedagogy may have a de-securitising effect by mobilising students for peaceful ends, facilitating democratic resilience in educational contexts may also help to build resilience against exaggerated fears of terrorism and suppressive worldviews, which may provide strong support for or protection of the democratic principles that stand as a bulwark against fear of terror, draconian security policies and, perhaps, even violent extremism itself (Sjøen, 2021).

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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