



in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate



# Civic Education Programs as Preventive Measures in Italy

Italy/D10.1 Country Report

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## Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of three education-focused interventions as deradicalization tools in the context of Italy. The aim is to identify challenges, different approaches, and effective practices in civic education as preventive measures against radicalization processes. Civic education programs, which shape individuals' beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions within communities, have been found to foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and democratic values. They also contribute to individuals' desistance from terrorist groups by broadening their political values and introducing alternative perspectives. These programs can address feelings of alienation and polarization by promoting active citizenship and a shared sense of belonging.

The report examines three EU projects coordinated by Italian research institutions: OLTRE, PRACTICE, and PROVA. Each project's scope, target groups, implementing organizations, and methods are summarized, followed by a detailed description of implementation and outcomes. The report discusses the lessons learned, achievements, drawbacks, and challenges of each project. A comparative summary of the projects' analysis highlights successful approaches in civic education-based interventions as deradicalization tools.

The analysis reveals that coercive approaches lack a preventive component and fail to provide effective long-term solutions to radicalization. Top-down initiatives that pre-define concepts and needs lack adaptability. Instead, preventive actions require an interdisciplinary approach to identify and analyse various factors contributing to radicalization. Participatory approaches, such as focus groups, role-plays, and theatrical methods, foster empathy, inclusion, critical thinking, and resilience to radicalization. These approaches involve stakeholders in co-defining and co-designing interventions, promoting commitment, focus, and a sense of belonging.

The report emphasizes the importance of involving the young population in tackling radicalization effectively and in the long term. Collaboration with educational institutions is crucial for offering preventive actions and providing tools for resilience at an early stage. By engaging youth, civic education programs can address radicalization factors and promote positive social change. The report concludes that an interdisciplinary, participatory, and youth-focused approach is key to successful deradicalization efforts.

# 1. Introduction

This report focuses on the analysis and description of three education focused interventions as deradicalization tools in the context of Italy. The main aim of this analysis is to highlight challenges, different approaches and solutions with a focus on effective practices in the field of civic education as preventive measures against radicalisation processes. This will be done by providing an analysis of existing and past participatory programs in the field of civic education as a deradicalization tool in order to indicate a path for the construction of an effective and innovative module of civic education as preventive measure and inclusionary practice.

We consider as ‘civic education programs’ all those initiatives of instruction that aim at affecting “people’s beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities” (Crittenden & Levine 2018), as well as foster critical thinking and promoting “civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance” (Rietbergen-McCracken 2018). Such programs have been found “to help shape personal efficacy (i.e., an individual’s belief in their ability to effect change, political participation, and tolerance” (Mouritsen & Jaeger 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, “educational tools as such have proven to foster individuals’ desistance from terrorist groups by broadening the scope of their political values, ideals, and concepts (e.g., justice, honor, freedom) and by introducing alternative perspectives and worldviews” (Koehler 2017, 224; see also Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2017; Yehoshua, 2014).

In this sense, civic education may have a positive impact on the I-GAP spectrum, especially in regard to *alienation* and *polarisation*. Indeed, on the one hand, the unifying theme in most contemporary studies in the field of alienation is the individual’s feeling of powerlessness with respect to wider, apparently hostile forces, leading them to lose agency in their everyday surroundings and interactions with others (among others see Parker 2007; Schwartz 2017; Ventriglio & Bhugra 2019). On the other hand, political scientists have identified the origins of recent polarization in the shift from social class divisions to divisions over *postmaterialist* values as being central to the crisis of Western political party systems (Inglehart & Baker 2000).

Against this background, civic education programs aim to turn injustice frames, alienating dynamics and polarizing narratives into campaigns to improve community life. They can do this by involving different actors, in particular the youth sector, social workers, civil society organizations and the educational/pedagogical sector with the aim of fostering democratic literacy, critical thinking, pro-social resilience to radical ideologies, active citizenship and a shared sense of belonging in a constructive and non-conflictual way.

Given these different goals, civic education programs may take different forms, “including classroom-based learning, informal training, experiential learning, and mass media campaigns” (Rietbergen-McCracken 2018), as well as more participatory approaches. These methods pay “great attention to the involvement of those who usually have no voice on policies and programmes”, so that “the empowerment of beneficiaries is increased, and critical thinking, civic engagement, problem-solving capabilities, and cooperation networking are encouraged” (Chiodini 2020, p. 175). Participatory methods may take for instance the form of role-plays or theatrical activities that actively promote civic engagement and democratic values without falling into counter-indoctrination dynamics.

The analysis focuses on three EU projects coordinated directly by Italian research institutions and targeting specific sectors and stakeholders in the Italian context:

- OLTRE – “Oltre l’orizzonte – Contro-narrazioni dai margini al centro” (Beyond the Horizon - Counter-narratives from the margins to the center);
- PRACTICE – “Preventing radicalisation in school by empowering teachers through continuing professional development”;
- PROVA – “PRevention Of Violent Radicalisation and violent Actions in intergroup relations”.

Based on the study of the projects’ documentation, publications, evaluation reports as well as direct interviews with project coordinators and main investigators, for each method/project, the report contains

- a summary of the general information on the scope, target groups, implementing organisations and methods of the chosen projects;
- a detailed description of the implementation of each project with a specific focus on methodology, constraints and outcomes;
- a discussion on the lessons, achievements, drawbacks, and challenges of the projects.

The report ends with a comparative summary of the projects’ analysis in order to highlight successful approaches adopted in civic education based interventions as deradicalization tools.

## 2. OLTRE project

### 2.1. General Information

OLTRE “Oltre l’orizzonte – Contro-narrazioni dai margini al centro” (Beyond the Horizon - Counter-narratives from the margins to the center) was a two-year (2018-2020) research project funded by the EU Internal Security Fund under the Civil Society Empowerment Programme.

The project focused specifically on religious extremism and aims to prevent Islamic radicalization among young Muslims (18-30 years old) with an immigration background (either first or second generations). According to the description of the project<sup>1</sup>, it involved the study and creation of original content produced for digital channels and disseminated on the most important platforms, with the goal both of sharing positive narratives, i.e. examples of inclusion, and of exposing the contradictions and false promises of radicalization. Specifically, it aimed to:

- (1) prevent second-generation Muslim youth at risk of social marginalisation/exclusion [...] from engaging in fundamental violent and radical movements, by providing them with opportunities to reflect on their problems, expectations, and wishes;
- (2) increase awareness of the risks of radicalisation among second generation Muslim youth involved in the co-design of the online communication campaign; and

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://oltre.uniroma2.it/>

(3) reduce misunderstandings, ignorance, existing stereotypes, and stigmatising representations of Islam and its followers among Italian young people (Gola 2022, p. 86).

A first peculiar characteristic of the project was that, despite the fact that most of EU-funded projects are proposed and implemented by international consortia comprising sometimes also partners from non-EU countries, OLTRE was carried out by an all-Italian consortium composed of four academic institutions (University of Roma 2 Tor Vergata – lead partner, Sapienza University of Rome, University of Cagliari and University of Palermo) and a series of associations working in intercultural contexts (Arci, Witness Journalism, Nahuel, SocialHub, Coordinamento nazionale delle nuove generazioni italiane) with the support of communication agencies (Officinæ and Jellyfish). Having a national consortium allowed a more focused intervention, tailored to the needs of a target group experiencing a common cultural, social and institutional scenario.

Another specificity of the project lies in the advanced participatory nature of most of the actions of the project, including research activities (Peruzzi, Anzera, Massa, 2020, p. 292). In particular, young people (with or without an immigration background) were involved in different activities such as workshops for the detection of the factors that can lead to radicalization, creative workshops to share alternative narratives to Islamic fundamentalism. More importantly, participants/target groups actively participated in the co-design of a communication campaign as "social media moderators" (as defined in the project's webpage), actively posting texts, videos and images of their daily experiences.

A third uncommon feature of the project was finally the inclusion of famous "ambassadors", that is, two well-known Italian musicians with immigration background, Mahmood and Maruego/Ma Rue. These ambassadors were involved in a series of interviews and actively participated in the creation of digital content for the project.

Therefore, the project approached de-radicalisation, or better, the development of counter-narratives against radicalization, at multiple levels. At micro level, participants co-designed directly to project's content creation activities, while the target of such activities was both the meso-level of alienated groups and the macro-level of the whole society.

## 2.2. Description and Analysis

Although the fil-rouge for all the activities of the project was the participatory approach towards the co-definition and co-development of project's goals and outputs, OLTRE can be roughly divided into three main consequential phases.

A first phase was dedicated to the research and analysis activities, namely the organization of a series of interviews, focus groups and socio-linguistics analyses on social networks aimed at providing the conceptual basis for the definition of goals and targets of the awareness campaign. Specifically, project partners carried out forty-two in-depth interviews, with first- and second-generation Muslims between 18 and 30 years of age. Interviews revolved around the following topics: "identity and sense of belonging; offline networks and internet use/consumption practices; education; ideology; relationship with peers and group dynamics; family support; perception of one's relationship with society (and possible reactions); relationship with politics; participation; democratic citizenship; religious knowledge;

autonomy/conflict resolution/ coping skills; dialogue; inclusion; control and safety" (Tumminelli 2022, p. 16).

After having gathered and analyzed the voices of young Muslims, a second phase aimed at their direct involvement in two different participatory activities. On the one hand, participants to the project could enroll in workshops dedicated to the enhancement of photographic communication skills: such workshops were organized as an online newsroom with the participation of professional journalists and with the goal of helping participants in writing, photographing and telling their stories and those of other young people in the same situation. On the other hand, participants were involved in workshops inspired by the "Theatre of the Oppressed". This type of theatre, created by the Brazilian theatre practitioner and drama theorist Augusto Boal, is a "participatory, interactive, and highly politicized technique based on Freire's concept that making people aware of their oppression will lead them to become agents of social change" (Dalla Déa 2012, p. 51). In the context of OLTRE, such methodology was used "to bring out emotions and physical manifestation linked to relevant issues of potential radicalisation such as identity, religion, values, discrimination, processes of exclusion, and vulnerability" (Volterrani 2022, p. 54).

Theatre workshops contributed to the content-creation of the project with three direct outputs. Firstly, the stories and life paths that emerged during the workshops become the basis of "Oltre il velo" (Beyond the veil), a show written and performed by Alessandra Preziosi, an actress who had been directly involved in the project. Secondly, and similarly, these stories were collected and depicted in a graphic novel authored by Gianluca Costantini, a well-known Italian cartoonist and activist. Finally, some participants of the theatre workshops were included as non-professional actors in a four-part web series entitled "Rajel" ('man' in Arabic, although it can assume different connotations such as "to become a man"). The web-series was endorsed by Italian singer Mahmood, while its official song was written and performed by Italian rapper Maruego/Ma Rue.

A third and final phase eventually focused on a participatory communication campaign involving twenty-two so called 'moderators' with a migration background (both first and second generations). The campaign was carried out on social media (Facebook and Instagram) and "produced around one hundred posts accompanied by images, videos, and comments, the result of discussions and comparisons between mixed pairs (one second-generation immigrant youth and one non-second-generation immigrant youth)" (Volterrani 2022, p. 55). Its main topics, i.e. the topics addressed in the posts on social networks were

- (1) the issue of the lack of recognition of second-generation boys and girls in everyday relationships and in their relationship with institutions,[...]
- (2) the sense of feeling like a foreign in your own country;
- (3) the complexity and richness of multi-belonging, of "hybrid identities" in which different traditions, tastes, languages and values are co-present;
- (4) the need to break the Islam-terrorism nexus conveyed mainly by the media and to debunk all other prejudices about the Muslim religion that create discrimination against second-generation children (Siino 2022, p. 105).

The communication campaign was roughly divided into four sub-phases with increasing degrees of autonomy granted to the 'moderators' and it ended with short "video-selfies" called Open-Mic through which the protagonists (and targets) of the project addressed directly the audience.

## 2.3. Lessons

OLTRE offers an important example on how activities aimed at the prevention of radicalization can be designed and implemented with a strong participative approach involving participants coming from different contexts and experiences.

The project's background assumption was that "in order to prevent radicalization it is necessary to reduce the vulnerability of subjects considered 'at risk'" (Macaluso, Siino, Tumminelli 2022, p. 120): specifically, "the condition of young people with migrant backgrounds is considered a risk factor, as it might expose them more strongly to social exclusion and consequently make them more sensitive to the attractive power of extremist and radicalizing propaganda" (Ibid.).

The way in which OLTRE tried to tackle and reduce such risk was precisely through the direct involvement of the target group in a process of co-design, co-creation and co-communication of original content. In this sense, participants in the project became "prosumers", that is both producers and consumers of the whole communication campaign (Siino 2022, p. 100).

The whole project was organized as to allow an increasingly deeper involvement of participants, starting from *co-operation* for the interviewing phase, to *collaboration* in the collection of data and experiences, to *co-production* in the analysis phase and in the consequent selection of the topics of the communication campaign, to finally *co-design* in the development of the contents of such campaign.

It has to be stressed that enabling participants to directly co-design the contents of a project/programme may result in a deviation from the expected themes. This is precisely what happened to OLTRE's campaign, which shifted from the topic of radicalisation *per se* to a wider religion and discrimination – though these may be considered nevertheless triggering factors. Indeed, projects' activities and the campaign's objectives had to be often recalibrated and refocused to accommodate interests and needs coming from the participants. However, this process of constant adjustment also triggered positive dynamics of mediation and re-discussion inside the consortium and between researchers and participants.

Notwithstanding this issue, OLTRE's participative approach had two direct positive outcomes. On the one hand, it allowed for the creation and re-generation of bonds between participants, thus strengthening their sense of belonging to a community and intensifying their social and digital resilience. On the other hand, it offered the means and tools through which to achieve a degree of cultural recognition in opposition to racialized, stereotyped and radicalized identities. These counter-narratives helped "directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging", as well as "undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'" (RAN 2015, p.4).

Indeed, the methodology adopted in the project aimed to demonstrate how "in the prevention of violent radicalisation, rather than coercive public policies, interventions that foresee mixed instruments of policy, such as the communication campaigns, can be more effective" (Macaluso 2022, p. 140). Undoubtedly, this can start from the active participation of those institutions and actors that approach the prevention of radicalization with a bottom-up perspective. However, the crucial step lies in a deeper and more active social and cultural involvement that goes beyond the simple consultation with civil society organizations and tries to subvert a rooted Eurocentric perspective that can risk "stigmatizing and further isolating potentially vulnerable individuals" (Ibid., p. 145). Accordingly, OLTRE demonstrated how the

co-creation, co-design and co-communication of shared content “enabled a space for dialogue and sharing, in which it was demonstrated not only that different imaginations can coexist, but that they can enrich each other” (Macaluso, Siino, Tumminelli 2022, p. 120).

### 3. PRACTICE project

#### 3.1. General Information

PRACTICE (Preventing radicalisation in school by empowering teachers through continuing professional development) was a three-year (2018-2021) EU project in the framework of the Erasmus+ funding programme. The project was coordinated by the Centre for Creative Development “Danilo Dolci”, a non-profit organisation based in Palermo and working in the field of education on the topics of nonviolence, peace and active participation. Other partners of the project were BLINC – Blended Learning institutions Cooperative (D), Merseyside Expanding Horizons (UK), KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Center (EL), Mhtconsult APS (DK), Verein Multikulturell (AU) and Fondazione Hallgarten-Franchetti Centro Studi Villa Montesca (IT).

The project’s rationale was based on the needs identified in the 2015 Paris Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education”, specifically on the issue of “empowering teachers so that they are able to take an active stand against all forms of discrimination and racism, to educate children and young people in media literacy, to meet the needs of pupils from diverse backgrounds, to impart common fundamental values and to prevent and combat racism and intolerance”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the project addressed the need of “supporting initial education and continuing professional development (CPD) at all levels, especially to deal with the increased diversity of learners”, as reiterated in the 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, PRACTICE focused specifically on the topic of radicalization and on the role of schools and teachers as deradicalizing agents: indeed, “schools have a key role to play in preventing radicalisation by promoting common European values, fostering social inclusion, enhancing mutual understanding & tolerance, and developing students’ critical thinking about controversial and sensitive issues as a key protective factor against radicalization” (PRACTICE 2019, p. 5).

Accordingly, the project aimed to

- develop an innovative and collaborative EU wide CPD programme on radicalism prevention within school education;
- empower teachers through capacity-building activities aimed to equip them with better tools to address diversity in the classroom and to understand and prevent radicalisation processes in educational settings;

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<sup>2</sup> Available at [https://eu.daad.de/medien/eu.daad.de.2016/dokumente/service/auswertung-und-statistik/paris\\_declaration\\_2015\\_en.pdf](https://eu.daad.de/medien/eu.daad.de.2016/dokumente/service/auswertung-und-statistik/paris_declaration_2015_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015XG1215\(02\)&from=LT](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015XG1215(02)&from=LT)

- enhance the development of critical thinking skills and strengthen citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education in secondary schools;
- foster the inclusion of students from all ethnic, faith and social backgrounds creating a safe space to become active and responsible citizens and open-minded members of society.<sup>4</sup>

PRACTICE targeted therefore primarily teachers and educational support staff. It offered an Open Educational Resource (OER) – a type of educational material in the public domain or introduced with an open license – providing theories, strategies, innovative approaches, exercises and non-formal education activities. Although the project can be considered to adopt mainly a top-down approach in regard to the definition and conceptualization of the topics contained in the training component of the OER, non-formal activities can be implemented with a bottom-up and participative perspective when students participate directly in the process of co-definition of the main concepts. Indeed, the “teacher could consider appropriate to spread context information before the assignment of tasks to students, in order to make the activity similar to an exercise or he/she can prefer the students find solution(s) basing on the knowledge and attitudes they actually have and further discuss with them once the activity is finished”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the project also foresee that students can be encouraged to actively and directly define issues, challenges and solutions based on their life experiences, without resorting to their pre-definition.

### 3.2. Description and Analysis

PRACTICE can be roughly divided into three main consequential phases: a mapping phase carried out in the partners’ countries, a phase dedicated to the drafting and finalization of the CPD programme, and a final provision of policy recommendations in CDP innovation, critical thinking teaching and the prevention of radicalisation in schools.

Mapping activities involved both desk and primary research and aimed to identify and analyse the situation regarding radicalisation, critical thinking, teaching methods, CPDs and potential gaps in this field in Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, Greece, Denmark and Austria, as well as the dynamics between critical thinking and radicalisation prevention in schools and in the educational sector. With regard to desk research, project partners were asked to identify, among other issues, the radicalisation situation in their countries, potential risk factors contributing to youth radicalisation, the relevant legal framework against radicalisation, the main activities and improvements regard the prevention of radicalisation incidents in schools, the main CPD programmes, critical thinking methods and projects in the field of youth radicalisation. Desk research was then complemented by field research through the collection and analysis of primary data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers, headmasters and in general stakeholders in the education sector. The main aim of this research phase was to record stakeholders’ views on how to promote critical thinking in schools, on how such promotion can help facilitate the prevention of radicalisation, on which CPD programmes were available to them and on which needs, and possible recommendations could be useful for the design of further teaching and training tools. This

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<sup>4</sup> As state on the project’s website: <https://practice-school.eu/the-project/>

<sup>5</sup> Info available at <https://practice-school.eu/media/practice-io3-background-research.pdf>

data constituted the central analysis of the first outputs of the project, i.e. six national reports and a comparative report.

On the basis and results of the mapping phase, the project's partners developed a Radicalisation Prevention Programme addressing secondary school teachers with the following aims:

- To develop personal critical thinking skills in pupils;
- To promote critical thinking and effective strategies to engage with pupils on local, national and international issues & grievances;
- To address effectively controversial issues challenging pupils' misinformed views and perception;
- To challenge false myths and stimulate understanding and appreciation of diversities;
- To provide basic knowledge on radicalism and tools to identify its first signs;
- To foster freedom of speech through pupil participation, while ensuring a safe environment for vulnerable pupils and promoting critical evidence analysis;
- To promote the values of democracy, active citizenship, pluralistic society, open communication and open-mindedness;
- To develop restorative approaches to resolve personal conflict and repair harm caused;

(PRACTICE 2019, p. 7)

The Programme was divided into two parts. The first one is a theoretical introduction to concepts, approaches and methodologies on the topics of radicalisation and its prevention, the promotion of critical thinking, the enhancement of active listening, open communication and digital awareness, the detection and deconstruction of stereotypes, biases and misconceptions through creative thinking, the resolution of intercultural conflicts, and the development of intercultural sensitivity. The second part includes a catalogue of several (more than 50) non-formal education activities that teachers can use in the classroom to address specific controversial issues that can lead to conflicts and polarising views among students.

This second part is itself divided into

- an introduction module proposing a number of practical ways for stimulating open discussions and exchange of ideas adaptable to any controversial issue that potentially could arise in class, or be perceived by teacher as "hot topic" to be addressed in a controlled and moderated way with students;
- six thematic modules going in depth in the analysis of specific topical issues – migration; gender; culture and identities; online Life, hate speech and cyberbullying; discrimination and rights; global conflicts and human rights (PRACTICE 2019, p. 9)

The Programme was complemented and supported by "Guidelines for Teachers" or "Teachers Handbook" with the aim of supporting teachers in the application of the Programme and of the peer-collaborative learning process, providing background information as to ensure that teachers will feel confident with the topics and potential instances of radicalisation in schools.

The final phase of the project saw the drafting of a series of Policy Recommendations for policy makers and other stakeholders in the education sector on CPD innovation, critical thinking teaching and the prevention of radicalization in schools. Recommendations were developed on the basis of the comparative report, the implementation phase of the CDP programme, the teachers' guidelines and a series of semi-structured interviews with headmasters and education policy makers at regional, national and EU level.

### 3.3. Lessons

As mentioned, PRACTICE may seem to adopt – at least on paper – mainly a top-down approach. Indeed, the use of a CPD programme implies the pre-definition of a series of concepts and approaches that are selected according to the scope, aim and target audience of the course. In the context of radicalisation studies, such choice needs to be carefully evaluated given, for instance, the varying effects that some radicalising factors may have in different contexts, or, among other issues, the dynamics and interrelation between radicalisation and freedom of speech. In order to restrict such wide focus to the actual needs of the target users, it is therefore important to collect and analyse their needs beforehand, as done precisely by PRACTICE in its initial phase. However, experiences and concepts of radicalisation may still greatly vary also among a small set of countries like those involved in the project.

Nevertheless, and in order to overcome the weak points of a strict top-down approach, PRACTICE also envisage a flexible process of co-definition of concepts and issues between direct and indirect targets of the project – that is, between teachers and pupils/students. This participatory approach is ensured through the implementation of non-formal education activities, in particular a module that aims to create a space of discussion on “controversial issues” such as

- Issues that deeply divide society – such as euthanasia, economic cutbacks, social welfare payments, immigration and so on;
- Issues that challenge personally held values and beliefs – strong political positions, racism, gay rights;
- Issues that generate conflicting explanations – historical events, conflicts such as Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel;
- Issues that evoke emotional responses – crime and imprisonment, education, abortion, disability;
- Issues that may cause students to feel threatened and confused – where their families have very strong views on an issue, where peer pressure is strongly in favour of one side of an argument.<sup>6</sup>

It is important not to underestimate the effects of such debates on both teachers and students. PRACTICE therefore suggests the creation of a safe space for discussion ensuring

- Safety for teachers: an approach which allows the topic, including its controversy, to be covered, but which does not place the teacher in a difficult or dangerous situation;
- Safety for students: an approach which allows students to explore a range of perspectives on an issue, but does not expect them to disclose personal information or encourage them to feel exposed because of their views.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the projects' material falls short of defining how this safety can be practically attained, as well as of carefully evaluating the negative effects of disclosing personal controversial beliefs such as, for instance, the stigma that some specific views can have in different societies. Indeed, the safest choice in this process of co-definition of concepts – and therefore in the whole module – seems the use of a role-play as a method for practicing critical

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<sup>6</sup> Info available at <https://practice-school.eu/part2/module1/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

thinking in a group (Module 1 – Activity 5).<sup>8</sup> In activity, participants are assigned specific roles that carry specific stances on a common controversial issue:

- Neutral position: the person expresses only the facts, with simple points, short and informative, without giving any opinion.
- Position in favour: the person expresses positive opinions, underlying the advantages and benefits of an idea.
- Position against: the person expresses negative opinions, emphasising the risks and dangers.
- Devil's advocate: the person counterattacks the expressed positions in favour and against.
- Creative perspective: the person looks for ideas outside the box, alternative options.<sup>9</sup>

Such roles may serve as filters between the chosen topic and the personal views of participants, who are therefore allowed to 'infuse the role' with their personal experience without clearly disclosing them. Also role-playing stimulates critical thinking because participants are forced to briefly adopt perspectives that can greatly vary from their own.

Indeed, a second lesson that can be drawn from PRACTICE is precisely the focus on critical thinking as a tool for resilience in schools. Critical thinking is meant as "the ability to assess and question information, opinions, ideas, and to determine the validity of arguments and ideologies", therefore acting as "a shield against fake news and biased propaganda, and support individuals in building their own identity and independent opinions" (PRACTICE 2019, p. 12). Such approach acquires a fundamental weight in schools where multiple identities, belongings and beliefs can meet and conflict. In this context, fostering critical thinking means increasing the resilience of both institutions and users/providers to the factors, drivers and dynamics of radicalization.

## 4. PROVA project

### 4.1. General Information

PROVA (PRevention Of Violent Radicalisation and violent Actions in intergroup relations) was a two-year project (2016-2018) funded in the framework of the Erasmus Plus Key Action 3 - *Social inclusion through education, training, and youth*. The project was coordinated by the University of Florence, Department of Education and Psychology, and included aufBruch Prison Theatre, an independent Berlin theatre project working with prisons, LABCOT an Italian non-profit organisation applying tools of community psychology, Psiterra, a Romanian NGO operating in the field of applied psychology, Giovanni Michelucci Foundation, an Italian foundation active in research and planning on social habitat and on the relationship between space and society, and the University of Barcelona, Department of Social Psychology and Quantitative Psychology. The project's consortium also avail itself of a series of associated partners that acted as key figures in the process of reaching the target groups:

- The Centro di Giustizia Minorile di Firenze (Florence) and the Jugendstrafanstalt (juvenile prison) of Berlin – public bodies that assisted project partners in reaching

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<sup>8</sup> Available at <https://practice-school.eu/activity5-role-play/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

professionals coming from juvenile justice system and minors or young-adults undergoing criminal proceedings, in detention, in alternative measure or in probation;

- “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania – a higher education institution that helped in reaching university students (WP4), while also supporting and supervising the production of guidelines;
- Observatory of the Penal System and Human Rights (Barcelona, Spain) – a research Institute/Centre that collaborated in research, training actions and production of guidelines.

The aim of the project was the prevention of radicalisation among juvenile offenders in prison and probation and the promotion of democratic values, fundamental rights, intercultural understanding and active citizenship. Specifically, the activities of the project were aimed at “increasing the understanding of violent radicalisation and involving stakeholders and social actors in building systems of interventions to prevent and counteract it” (Guidi & Babetto 2020, p. 49). Accordingly, the project directly targeted the following actors:

- (1) Professionals in the juvenile justice system,
- (2) Stakeholders committed to inclusion policies, and
- (3) Minors and young adults under criminal proceedings, with the involvement of university students for improving civic engagement and positive relationships (Ibid.).

On a methodological level, PROVA was based on the assumption that reactive and security-oriented approaches may contribute to stigmatisation processes since psychological evaluations are often used as “a determinist indication of dangerous individual features” (Meringolo 2020a, p. ix). Instead, a proactive and educational approach relies on participatory activities – such as “peer-to-peer relationships for ‘learning by doing’, [the enhancement of] cultural competences and positive behaviours in groups experiences, and space re-imagination for learning the sense of belonging to local communities” –, thus “making room for creative experiences, like theatre, narrative and visual methodologies” (Meringolo 2020b, p. 16).

Although data on recidivism among project’s participants is not available, it has been registered that prison professionals evaluated positively methods and activities, considering them “as an innovative way to reduce conflicts between detainees and increase the sense of civic engagement” (Marcetti, Masetti & Migliori 2020, p. 169), while “participation also allowed the acquisition of technical skills [...] producing positive effects on the lives of young people, particularly about future orientation and new perspectives of life outside the prison” (Ibid.).

## 4.2. Description and Analysis

PROVA was divided into 4 main so-called actions: preparation, training, workshops and evaluation.

The preparatory phase aimed “to increase the understanding of violent radicalization and activated responses in Europe and [...] to involve stakeholders and social actors in building systems of preventive and contrasting interventions”.<sup>10</sup> To achieve this, the project carried out four main activities:

- collecting and analysing data;

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<sup>10</sup> Info available at <https://www.provaproject.org>

- mapping the professionals that work in juvenile justice systems and the stakeholders that are involved in cultural, social and integration politics;
- organising focus groups with the involvement of these professionals; and
- sharing existing goods practices.

Focus groups were organised in all partner countries (Italy, Germany, Romania and Spain/Catalonia) and help identify some common issues and purposes that guided following projects' activities, namely the higher risk for younger generations to undergo processes of radicalization, the need for suitable collective spaces in detention facilities for the sharing of positive values and relations, and the importance of international networks of professionals (social workers, prison staff, etc.) to enable the sharing of good practices.

The second phase was dedicated to the organisation of training activities and participatory meetings for different stakeholders such as “professionals of the juvenile justice system, health, social and education professionals, volunteers, ombudsmen of protecting minors and prisoners' rights, and etc”.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the trainings, their aim was that of enhancing participants' competences about radicalisation, team-building skills, empowering activities, and the planning of preventive interventions for the mediation of conflicts among minors/young adults under criminal proceedings. Training methods ranged from lectures and presentations to storytelling, narrative methods and theatre.

With regard to the participatory meeting instead, their aim was that of fostering the participation of policy makers, local authorities and representatives in the contrast of youth, highlighting the importance of revitalizing urban spaces for collective use, and enhancing the capacity of working in synergy with local social actors. For these activities, participatory methods seemed to be preferred and included World Cafè techniques, roundtables, open discussions, role-plays and theatre workshops. Among other issues, these meetings highlighted the need to improve social cohesion and inclusion through activities that foster group membership and promote a common social identity beyond pre-constituted labels. In this sense, precisely theatre and theatrical methodologies have been evaluated as an important learning opportunity.

The third phase of the project focused specifically on minors and young adults under criminal proceedings (with the participation also of university students in the fields of Education, Psychology and Social Work) and consisted in two main activities: educational/ participatory workshops supervision/tutoring with workshops' participants. The aim of the whole phase was that of preventing and containing violence and radicalization through the rethinking and reimagination of the inner spaces of juvenile detention facilities and urban spaces at risk.

With regard to the workshops, their aim was that of providing a peer experience that could foster positive relationships and intercultural dialogue. Project partners adopted different methodologies such as participatory methods, group works, “Tree of Life” narrative practices (see Gavrilovici, Dronic & Remaschi 2020), storytelling tools, drama games, social theatre tools and other theatrical methods (see Syrbe 2020). Workshops were very positively evaluated by those involved (minors/young adults, university students and professionals), in particular in regard to innovative and interactive activities. Partners also registered a change

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

of attitudes in convicted minors, who moved “from reluctance and hostility at the beginning of the workshop to respectful and more open relationships at the end of it”.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to supervision/tutoring instead, it aimed to promote a critical reflection on the encounters through group discussions. The process of supervision highlighted a series of positive effects of a participatory approach to the prevention of violent radicalisation:

- minors/young adults enhanced and acquired new socio-relational and practical skills;
- other voluntary participants (university students and outside volunteers) got to know better prison services, gained new socio-relational/emotional skills and were able to interact with people experiencing marginalization, thus overcoming preestablished labels and stereotypes;
- professionals learned new effective strategies to contrast the marginalization of youth at risk of violent radicalization and to promote their participation and active citizenship.

Nevertheless, supervision also underlined a further need for “networking and collaboration among different partners (prison officer, professionals, social workers and other social actors), and training about cultural competence”.<sup>13</sup>

The last phase of the project was dedicated to the evaluation of the implemented activities with a bottom-up process (participatory evaluation), that is, through the involvement of both target groups and external experts. Furthermore, the evaluation phase allowed partners to gather qualitative data for a first draft of national and European guidelines concerning the prevention of violent radicalisation and of violent actions in intergroup relations, one of the main outcomes of the project.

### 4.3. Lessons

PROVA’s evaluation phase and guidelines offer a useful overview of the main lessons that can be drawn from the project.

One of the main successes of the project was the involvement of relevant stakeholders and target groups from the early phases. This resulted in “an authentic commitment to the intervention, potentially increasing its success and ensuring their support” (Cecchini & Donati 2020, p. 136), while “participants’ efforts in changing the community foster their sense of belonging and strengthen social networks to overcome differences among community groups” (Ibid.). Furthermore, and even more importantly, an early involvement of relevant stakeholders has been found to allow the development of stronger ties that can last beyond the limited (temporal) scope of a European project. In the case of PROVA project, participatory activities enabled the creation of a network of expertise that could be used to find new opportunities of cooperation and knowledge sharing even after the project’s end. Also, the direct involvement of university students appeared as a crucial strategy to develop skills and provide experiences that are fundamental for the prevention of radicalisation (Marcetti, Masetti & Migliori 2020, p. 169).

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<sup>12</sup> Outcomes available at [https://www.provaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP4-A4\\_1.pdf](https://www.provaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP4-A4_1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Outcomes available at <https://www.provaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP4.-A4.2-SUPERVISION-OF-MINORS%20%99-WORKSHOPS-.pdf>

However, the main lesson that can be drawn from the PROVA project is undeniably the need of adopting a participatory approach *tout court*, that is, from-network building to data-collection, from the choice of methods to evaluation.

It has been already pointed out how the involvement of participants from an early stage allowed the creation of stronger ties and commitment that could last beyond the natural end of the project. In addition, involving professionals as early as in the preparatory phase helped researchers gain an insight into practices, attitudes, processes and opportunities in the field of youth radicalisation prevention, while also providing them with a list of main issues that require specific action (Cecchini & Donati 2020).

More clearly, PROVA adopted participatory methods throughout the implementation of both training activities and workshops. With regard specifically to the training phase, it has been pointed out how

the multi-tiered participatory design (focus groups/training/roundtables) allowed the team of trainers to adapt the initial theory and training evaluation derived topics and methodologies to the organisational, inter-organisational and local needs; the focus groups invested the participants with a platform for the recognition of experience and expertise, and the training was participant-centred creating the context for professional community development with shared knowledge and values, and finally, the roundtables supported reflections which included appreciation of the training features and suggestions and recommendations for the future (Gavrilovici, Dronic & Remaschi 2020, p. 130).

With regard to the workshops, narrative practices, life story-telling and participatory planning were all very positively welcomed by both participants and prison staff (Marcetti, Masetti & Migliori 2020). In particular, theatrical methods enabled also the dissemination and communication of participants' experiences through public performances. Indeed, among the positive effects that theatrical methodologies had on participants and the broader public, it has been highlighted that

- participants were “proud of their teamwork and therefore also more confident in their own ability to work in a team” (Syrbe 2020, p. 107);
- participants increased their self-esteem since they gained recognition from a broader external audience;
- participants acquired artistic skills while also developing their potential and discovering new interests;
- participants were able to show “another side of themselves and therefore improve their relationship to the prison staff” (Syrbe 2020, p. 108);
- the broader public had the opportunity to gain a more realistic image of the prison and its staff.

Finally, PROVA can show how a participatory perspective can go beyond the implementation of specific methodologies to allow for the involvement of participants also in the evaluation phase. This way, it is possible to detect and measure change within a community or a system (e.g., prisons).

## 5. General Conclusions

Through the analysis of three relevant projects, this report has highlighted a series of successful approaches adopted in education focused interventions as deradicalization tools. The analysed projects were chosen because of their illustrative features (targets, approaches, tools, etc.) as well as for their focus on preventive actions.

As a general result of the analysis, it seems that coercive approaches fail to offer an effective and long-term answer to radicalisation processes, mainly because they precisely lack a preventive component. At the same time, top-down initiatives relying on the pre-definition of concepts, issues and needs lack in flexibility and therefore adaptability to varying contexts.

Instead, actions of prevention seem to require an interdisciplinary approach to better identify and analyse all the different factors (be social, political, legal, behavioural, psychological, etc.) that may cause a process of radicalisation, and consequently all those factors that can revert or prevent such event. At the same, different disciplines may offer methodologies that can be used for specific interventions as part of a wider approach to de-radicalisation and radicalisation prevention.

Nevertheless, participatory approaches (focus groups, groups works, role-play and theatrical methods) were found to be much more useful in fostering empathy, inclusion, mutual understanding, knowledge sharing and communicative skills, all factors that have been demonstrated to increase resilience to radicalisation processes. Specifically, participatory approaches are able to foster critical thinking – that is, “the ability to assess and question information, opinions, ideas, and to determine the validity of arguments and ideologies” (PRACTICE 2019, p. 12), which acts as “a shield against fake news and biased propaganda, and support individuals in building their own identity and independent opinions” (Ibid.).

Participatory approaches are not restricted only to the organisation of planned activities but may be extended to reshape the used methods through perspectives of co-definition and co-design. Indeed, including relevant stakeholders in the process of defining issues and needs to be tackled had a positive effect in terms of both commitment and focus, enabling for more specific and direct interventions. Instead, co-design can help participants acquire new skills, while fostering a sense of belonging drawn from a common purpose. In addition, stakeholders can participate also in the evaluation phase: this can help researchers and policymakers detect better and more precisely processes of change, although impartiality and objectivity need always to be ensured (see Chiodini, 2020).

Finally, the analysis of OLTRE, PRACTICE and PROVA projects has shown how radicalisation can be tackled in an effectively and long-term perspective only with the involvement of the young population. This can be done by collaborating more extensively with education institutions to offer preventive actions and therefore address radicalisation factors and provide tools for resilience as early as possible.

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