
Youth Delinquency or Everyday Racism? Front-line Professionals' Perspectives on Preventing Racism and Intolerance in Sweden

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Abstract

In this article, I ask which problematizations of racism and intolerance that substantiate a local implementation of a targeted educational program in Sweden, called the Tolerance Project. By participating in municipality-level meetings and conversations with front-line professionals concerning the recent implementation of the program in one specific region, I have found several motivations for the continuing work to reduce racism and intolerance at schools. To emphasize this point, I have divided the problematizations into four ideal types and applied a 'what's the problem represented to be' analysis to each of them. The four problematizations can be described in the following terms: generational racism, growth of the Sweden Democrats, normalization of racist language, and general 'at-risk' youths. The first three problematizations are context dependent, in terms of both time (during the so-called refugee crisis) and space (in a region with a long history of National Socialism). Problematising generational racism, growth of the Sweden Democrats and normalization of racist language indicate that what is mainly to be prevented is anti-immigrant sentiments in the young as well as the adult population. This implies a limitation to the role of schools in prevention, as adults cannot be directly targeted by the school. The fourth ideal type, at-risk youth, emphasizes that there are certain risk factors that might cause young people to later radicalize or deviate in one way or another. This corresponds to the general discourse of radicalization, but, in line with other studies of front-line professionals' perspectives, there is no clear distinction between preventing radicalization and fostering democratic citizens. Furthermore, the conglomeration of problematizations might decrease the stigmatizing effect that a targeted initiative can have, as opposed to initiatives that operate with one specific target group. The Tolerance Project might thus be a useful model for the prevention of all forms of radicalization.

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Introduction

As politicians around Europe are formulating and revising action plans against radicalization and violence-promoting extremism, teachers and social workers are increasingly being made

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aware of their important role in prevention. In some countries, the authorities have gone far in imposing responsibilities on front-line professionals, such as through the British ‘Prevent duty’, which entails that teachers and others are obliged to report individuals suspected of radicalization (Busher et al. 2017). In high trust-based societies such as the Nordic ones, there is currently no such thing as an educator’s duty to report ‘signs of radicalization’.² Nevertheless schools have a mandate to foster democracy, and teachers are expected to identify pupils that need to be paid extra attention, according to the prevailing situation. This places a lot of trust and power in the hands of front-line professionals such as teachers and other youth workers.

According to a recent evaluation of national action plans against radicalization in the Nordic countries, there is a general tendency to stress the importance of education, without necessarily suggesting any concrete initiatives (Sivenbring 2017). This does not mean that there are no preventive initiatives available; rather, there is a lack of analysis of such works (Bjørngo and Gjelsvik 2015), especially work against right-wing extremism (Fangen and Carlsson 2013) and antisemitism (Löwander and Hagström 2011). There is also a lack of up-to-date studies of right-wing extremist or extreme nationalist groups, as the qualitative studies conducted in the 1990s have not continued to the same extent since then (Bjørngo and Gjelsvik 2015). A logical consequence of this is that the national action plans against radicalization in the Nordic countries are still influenced by how the environments looked during the 1990s. Because of the lack of evaluations and analyses of local preventive initiatives, it is mostly up to the preventive agents designated by the governments to describe exactly what is to be prevented and how to do so.

During the school year 2015/2016, a Holocaust-based educational program to reduce racism and intolerance among youths called the Tolerance Project (TP) was implemented in several municipalities in Sweden. This serves as a timely case to explore how the national

² There is, however, a growing concern among scholars that educators, influenced by the national security discourse, look for signs of radicalization, although it is not their official duty to do so (See Mattsson and Säljö’s analysis of the National Coordinator in Sweden from 2017, and Hertz’s report on social work against extremism from 2016).

recommendation to work with prevention in schools is being implemented locally. Apart from a study of the economic benefits of reducing young people's engagement in racist environments in the municipality where it was developed (Lundmark and Nilsson 2013), the Tolerance Project has never been externally evaluated (Hertz 2016). The program is nevertheless listed as a case of best practice in the Guide to countering far-right extremism, published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Ramalingam 2014).

The Tolerance Project builds on well-established democratic and educational principles in Sweden and functions as an elective course for upper-secondary pupils. It culminates with a trip to Holocaust memorial sites in Poland (Mattsson and Adler 2008). Because it constitutes an additional expense for the municipality, each municipality must select in which areas or schools it should be implemented. Once a school is chosen, all pupils in the eighth or ninth grade can apply, but it is the project leaders (teachers or other youth workers) who select the participants. A central purpose is to create a dynamic group consisting of both intolerant and confident pupils. Certain pupils are therefore encouraged or recommended to apply. Since the project operates only at some schools and is offered to a small selection of pupils, some kind of problem analysis must be made prior to implementation, based on local needs and assumptions. In this article, I will try to shed some light on this problem analysis by asking what the problem of racism and intolerance is represented to be in this specific preventive environment.

The 'what is the problem represented to be' approach is derived from a policy analysis based on the discursive notion that, as discourses, policies are not just reactions or solutions to problems but also constitute or give shape to them (Bacchi 2009). I am thus not examining the efficiency of the program or the solutions to the issues of racism and intolerance, but which target groups the front-line professionals involved in the implementation are working with. Which problematizations of racism and intolerance substantiate local implementations of the Tolerance Project? Considering that the teachers and youth workers that work with the TP are not restricted to working only with this program, their take on prevention might say something about the role front-line professionals have in general in preventing radicalization

and how this corresponds to the national discourse on radicalization represented in the government action plans.

Background Information

In 2011 the Swedish government presented the first national action plan against violence-promoting extremism (Government Offices of Sweden 2011). The plan addresses what they called ‘the White Power environment’, which has a long history in Sweden (Lööv 2015), ‘the autonomist environment’ which is the opposite of the White Power environment, and ‘the Islamist extremist movement’ which is the newest threat according to the Swedish Security Police. The government’s attempt to tackle all kinds of extremism with one strategy has been critiqued for undermining the ideologies and different causes that lie behind versions of extremism as well as for too much of a focus on youth (Lööv et al. 2013). In addition to the claim made in the action plan “that it is primarily young men who join violent extremist movements” (Government Offices of Sweden 2011: 10), half of the suggested measures concern already established youth work organizations, such as The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF). Although the Tolerance Project was not mentioned in the plan, its growing implementation should be understood in this context. Four years later, the TP was given a salient role in the government-initiated Segerstedt Institute: a resource centre against violence-promoting ideologies and structures and racist organizations, at Gothenburg University. The centre was inaugurated in August 2015 and has since arranged and coordinated the education of new Tolerance Project leaders from other parts of the country. Initially created in Kungälv to prevent youths from joining a National Socialist environment prevalent in the 1990s, the program is now being developed in other municipalities and contexts. When it was first developed, emphasis was put on recruiting young individuals on the fringes of the local Nazi environment. The presence of a Nazi environment is currently not a prerequisite for implementing the model, but the aim remains to “sow a seed of doubt” about the ideas that such racist groups promote (Mattsson 2014). Theoretically, this suggests

that the main problems to be prevented are youths with racist attitudes or youths who flirt with racist environments. This is easier said than done. A central challenge for any implementation of anti-racist programs is to adapt the broad definition of racism that has become widely used in Sweden.

The Meaning of Racism

Traditional racism is usually defined as the idea that humans can be divided into hierarchically and genetically distinct groups. Since it was found that there is no such thing as genetically distinct human races, critical race theorists have argued for a broadening of the term to capture contemporary forms of hostility towards outgroups, and the term has been given a broader meaning including ‘cultural racism’ (Balibar 1991) or ‘racism without race’ (Miles 1993). Within this framework, it is further argued that racism is inherent in everyday structures and is not a problem for individuals as in “to be or not to be a racist” (Essed 1991: 3). This broad definition of racism is clearly evident in the latest *National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime*, “that different cultures are unable to coexist has come to be an expression of racism today” (Government Offices of Sweden 2017: 11). The plan problematizes both traditional racism, which can be found in extreme nationalist ideology, and structural and unconscious racism, which can be found everywhere among a larger proportion of the population. Theoretically (and often in practice), this broad definition of racism can be applied to the anti-immigrant party of the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna – SD). According to the SD, it is immigrants from Muslim countries especially that “have found it hardest to harmoniously coexist with Swedish and Western culture” (SD program 2011: 27). As this is in stark contrast to the otherwise multicultural and pro-immigrant discourse in Sweden (Borevi 2012), the Sweden Democrats can (and often are) regarded as part of the racist problem in Sweden today.

Racist Environments

Another reason why the Sweden Democrats are labelled culturally racist or ‘culturally nationalist’ (Teitelbaum 2017) is that they grew out of the militant activist group called Keep Sweden Swedish (Bevara Sverige Svenskt – BSS) in 1988. The Party leader since 2005 Jimmy Åkesson has attempted to get rid of the racist stamp by evicting controversial members from the party and promoting a ‘zero-tolerance’ of racism. Despite such efforts, the remaining political establishment in Sweden has refused to cooperate with the party, which has probably contributed to their continued growth since they are seen as the only party that address the consequences of immigration (Kiiskinen and Saveljeff 2010). In the national election in 2010, they entered parliament with 5.7 percent support and in 2014 with 12.9 percent support. During the so-called refugee ‘crisis’ in 2015, Sweden received 162, 877 asylum seekers, the highest amount per capita in Europe (Geddes and Scholten 2016). Until the government tightened its asylum policy on 24 November 2015, the Sweden Democrats were the only parliamentary party that wanted to severely restrict immigration, particularly from Muslim populations. By the end of that year, Party support reached 19.9 percent (Statistics Sweden November 2015).

The largest organization in Sweden that still promotes traditional racism; with the meaning that humans can be divided into different biological races that cannot mix or coexist, is the self-declared National Socialist Nordic Resistance Movement (Nordiska motståndsrörelsen – NMR). Established in Sweden in 1997, the organization has since 2015 been a pan-Nordic movement that seeks to establish a unified Nordic state consisting of what they believe to be an ethnically homogeneous Nordic people (Nordfront 2016). Inspired by the parliamentary success of the SD, and the attempt by the National Socialist Party of Swedes (Svenskarnas Parti - SvP) to gain influence between 2009 and 2014, the NMR announced its own parliamentary branch in 2015. When the SvP dissolved in May 2015, the NMR immediately recruited former SvP members and is now the biggest National Socialist organization in the Nordic countries. While the description of the White Power environment in the national action plan, based on prior research, is a “young, male-dominated sub-culture”

(Government Offices of Sweden 2011: 44: 15), the leading figures of the NMR are currently around 35 years old (Expo 2016). Although the NMR consists of people of all ages, most of them have been part of the racist environment for a long time.

Research on Ways into Racist Environments

A central point in the life stories of former activists is that they became engaged in the White Power environment when still teenagers (Kimmel 2007; Fangen 1999; Lööv 1995). The way into racist movements often starts with difficulties in coping with school, such as learning difficulties or being bullied. Entry may therefore be an attempt to fill different social and psychological needs, such as for belonging, identity, friends, protection, status or excitement, and to a lesser extent may be due to ideological conviction (Simi et al. 2016; Lööv 2009; Kimmel 2007; Bjørgo and Carlsson 2005; Fangen 2001). Another central point in some defector stories is contact with an older person in the racist environment, such as another family member (Mattsson and Adler 2008; Kimmel 2007). This corresponds to the general socialization theory that children are mostly influenced in the home (Allport 1954). A more applied term for racism learned at home (through immediate or extended family) is generational racism, a point that has been made in an attempt to show the geographical stronghold of the White Power environment in some parts of Sweden (Lööv 2009). In a comparison of votes for National Socialist parties in 1938 with votes for the Sweden Democrats in 1991 and the Party of Swedes in 2014 in a selection of 35 municipalities, the geographical stronghold theory was tested, but determined to be in need of further examination (Blombäck 2016).

The Role of Schools in Prevention

Thinking of the amount of time children spend at school as a way of shaping identity, as well as having the overall aim of preparing children for adult life, it is commonly acknowledged that schools have an important role in the fostering of democracy and thereby hinder recruitment to extreme environments (Bjørgo and Carlsson 2005). Early prevention of

racism and intolerance, such as the work that is done in schools, is argued to be not very different from primary or general crime prevention (Bjørge 2015). Safeguarding democracy is thus something that is going on in everyday practices at school, but, as in any institution, sometimes extra measures are needed. Implementation of the Tolerance Project is an example of that. Secondary efforts, what can be called targeted initiatives, must handle the challenge that it is not clear at an early age which youths will end up in extreme environments and which not. The trend towards parliamentary nationalism, as opposed to the White Power skinhead culture of the 1980s and 1990s, implies that members of extreme groups are becoming less visible. As an example of that, in a study of radical-right activists among students in Germany, teachers differed when it came to whether they were able to identify the activists or not (Miller-Idriss 2009: 95–96). If teachers attempt to identify the most extreme pupils, as in the selection of participants for the Tolerance Project, there is a risk of both over and under identification.

Pitfalls of Targeted Initiatives

The British Prevent strategy is a much cited and debated example of over-identification, as many young Muslims were being regarded by their teachers as part of a ‘suspect community’ which caused frustration and lack of trust among Muslim youths (Thomas 2016; Awan 2012; Kundnani 2009). Critics of the Prevent duty advocate citizenship education for all as the best way to prevent radicalization among youths, as it also promotes inclusion (Thomas 2016). The pitfall of targeting a small group of young individuals is the risk of creating a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’; that is, reducing an individual to the deviant quality, and thereby encouraging the person to display that quality (Merton 1948; Becker 1973: 33–34).

Comparable to young Muslims’ reactions to Prevent and similar strategies today, former members of racist movements have explained that the more the surrounding environment attacked and was suspicious of their behaviour and ideas, the more they were pushed into the extremist group (Personal conversation with a Swedish defector in 2016;

Lindahl and Matsson 2000; Fangen 1999). A suggested alternative to stigmatization and ostracism is establishing dialogue between adult prevention workers and youths that are perceived to be ‘at-risk’ (Fangen and Carlsson 2013: 334; Miller-Idriss 2009: 118; Mattsson and Adler 2008). The Tolerance Project has been developed within this dialogic framework. In this article, I examine how front-line professionals working with the TP balance the responsibility of identifying youths at-risk with the responsibility not to themselves encourage the creation of suspect communities at school.

Method and Material

The following analysis builds on participant observation in seven meetings where a group of front-line professionals discuss the implementation of the Tolerance Project in one or more municipalities. From May 2015 to June 2016, I lived in a Swedish region (county or *län*) that was starting up the Tolerance Project in several municipalities. Just before I started my fieldwork, eighteen teachers and social workers from the region had taken the course in Tolerance Project leadership at Gothenburg University. The decision to send pedagogues to the project leader course was made in 2014, and the start-up was coordinated by an employee at the regional crime prevention office, who functioned as my main gatekeeper by introducing me to the group and inviting me to TP-related sessions with the front-line professionals involved. Between December 2015 and June 2016, three regional half-day sessions were arranged by the coordinator. In these meetings, future and current project leaders who were working to implement the program at their respective schools met to discuss their progress and share best practice. The group of project leaders represented five municipalities and eight different schools.

Four schools in four municipalities implemented the TP for the first time in 2015. Two schools had worked with it before and wanted to continue, and two schools wanted to start up but had not been allocated money by the municipality to actually do so. One of the four schools that introduced the project in 2015 invited me to participate in the project from start to

finish, from planning to execution. This allowed me to participate in local meetings that were held to discuss progress, together with the municipality employees involved. In total, four local TP meetings were held during the school year. Employees from two other schools in the same municipality participated in one of the local meetings to discuss further allocation of money. The main source of material for this analysis is thus from participant observation, with the meaning of being “present while they exercise certain activities typical of the environment or the organization they are a part of” (Fangen 2004: 1). The organization was the regional implementation of the Tolerance Project. To clarify unfinished discussions that occurred during the meetings, I initiated five open-ended conversations, with an interview guide based on a few key words (Repstad 2007: 78), on such topics as the motivations for working with the program and how the participating pupils had been recruited.

Because I rely on naturally occurring speech and informal interview conversations, my field notes were often written down subsequent to my observations and I sometimes forgot who exactly said what. The point of this article, however, is not who said what, but how racism and intolerance was problematized in this particular local context of prevention. In that sense, the fieldwork had an institutional character, focusing on my informants’ practical work experiences, rather than being about them as individuals (Widerberg 2007). The informants were provided with oral and written information about me and my project, the first time we met. They also had the option of reading the quotations I used (only three of the informants took advantage of this opportunity though). I decided to preserve the anonymity of my informants, so I refrain from providing additional information about the region, the specific municipalities, or the schools involved. A description of the whole research project has been submitted and approved by the Swedish ethical committee EPN.

Informants present in TP meetings	Location and place of work
Informant 1, 2 (interview) and 3 (interview)	Municipality 1, School 1 (Previous TP experience)
Informant 4 (interview), 5 and 6	Municipality 1, School 2 (TP implemented 2015)

Informant 7	Municipality 1, School 3 (No prior TP experience)
Informant 8, 9, 10 (interview), 11 and 12	Municipality 1 several schools (Previous TP experience)
Informant 13 (interview), 14 and 15	Municipality 2 several schools (Previous TP experience)
Informant 16 and 17	Municipality 3, School 4 (TP implemented 2015)
Informant 18	Municipality 4, School 5 (TP implemented 2015)

Analytical Tool

In order to answer which problematizations of racism and intolerance substantiate local implementations of the Tolerance Project, I draw on Bacchi's 'what's the problem represented to be' (WPR) approach developed for policy analysis (Bacchi 2009). While the WPR approach has been developed for questioning governmental policies, it is my argument that the approach is well suited for analysing local policies, such as municipal decisions to implement the Tolerance Project. The WPR approach starts from a concrete proposal, such as the decision to implement the TP, and works backwards to reveal what it represents—that is, different problematizations of racism and intolerance. Once one or several problem representations are identified, Bacchi suggests looking for the underlying assumptions or premises of each problematization. This can be conceptual logics, such as a widely used definition of racism, or political rationalities, such as the notion of youth governance. The third question in the WPR model builds on Foucauldian genealogy and concerns how a specific representation of the problem has historically come about. This must be seen in light of both the overall context in Sweden and the specific local context. I account for the latter below. The fourth question is about the silences, or what is not problematized, or alternatively how it could be thought about differently. For my purpose, the fifth question is especially interesting, as it concerns the potential effects on those involved, such as the 'subjectification effect' of the creation of target groups (Bacchi 2009: 15) or what is often referred to as suspect communities in the discourse of radicalization. The last question in Bacchi's WPR approach builds on the question of genealogy and concerns the potential spread of specific problematizations: their ability to become legitimate or even hegemonic or, on the other hand, their tendency to be disrupted by other problematizations. As with traditional discourse

analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), the WPR approach is a way to distinguish between different world views and identify the power dimension in language use.

Time and Situational Context

Similar to a couple of other areas in Sweden, the particular region where I conducted my fieldwork has been argued to have had a continuous history of National Socialism, from the first party formation in the 1920s (Löow 2015) to current activity such as posting flyers, hanging up banners and town square demonstrations. In 2015, the most active extreme nationalist group in the area was the NMR and a less organized activist group called the Nordic Youth (Nordisk Ungdom – NU), both of which stepped up their ‘refugees NOT welcome’ campaign during the summer. At this point, Sweden faced an increasing number of refugees and had to find new ways to settle them. Prior to 2015, most of the municipalities in the region had little or no experience with settling refugees, simply because the small areas (*tettsteder*) were not regarded, by arriving immigrants, as being as attractive as the big cities that already had large minority populations. This changed when the number of refugees exceeded the capacity of the big cities. New refugee reception centres were established in small areas outside the towns, such as where schools number 1 and 2 were located. There was great concern as to how best to integrate and accommodate the newly arrived children into schools that had had few immigrants beforehand. During this period, the work to settle newly arrived refugees took up a great deal of the capacity of municipality workers and teachers.

Analysis

Based on my informants’ discussions and personal experience with implementation of the Tolerance Project, I have identified several motivations and arguments for local implementation. Different problematizations of racism and intolerance were typically intertwined when they argued for why the project should be implemented at their particular

school or in their particular municipality. For analytical purposes, I have discerned four ideal types of problematization.

1. Generational Racism

The first time I met with the group of project leaders in the region, I was told a story that exemplified a recurring issues in the local discourse. In the hall of a local kindergarten where the children hang their jackets, someone had crossed out the names of two Somali children. The names were above the jacket hooks at a height that the school employee (informant 2) who told the story believed to mean that an adult must have made the crosses. She expressed further concerns about additional refugees coming to the area and what this would lead to. Here, the problem is represented to be negative attitudes toward immigrants within the local adult population, especially in combination with the establishment of new refugee reception centres in the area. When I talked to the school employee sometime later, she admitted the incident was rather rare and not typical at the time:

“The problem is still there even if it is not very explicit: the old racists still live in the area and they have children who go to the school. People know who they are, at least which families.”

A direct subjectification effect of this was that parents became part of the target group, as her colleague (informant 3) confirmed when we discussed the Tolerance Project in practice:

“The parents should take part (in TP). The thought is that through the children you can reach the parents’ attitudes as well, but it is hard to document without following them over longer periods of time.”

“There is a culture of racism and xenophobia here, but not just xenophobia connected with immigrants from other countries, but toward everything that is strange and different, for example homosexuals, although this has gotten better lately.”

The references to ‘old racists’ and ‘a culture of racism’ problematize racism in a historical perspective, confirming the geographic stronghold hypothesis (Löow 2009) and the general socialization theory (Allport 1954). The underlying assumption of problematizing generational racism is the idea that parents or grandparents pass on their negative attitudes to their children. As expressed during a local TP meeting: “these thoughts are not coming from the children: it is contagious” (informant 2). During a conversation with a school employee (informant 4) in another small area, I came across a concrete example of this when we talked about why the Tolerance Project had been implemented at that particular school.

“There is a group of boys who seek their identity by talking bad about immigrants. This talk led to concern among a group of peers, especially girls. (...) One of the boys was using SD rhetoric ‘let us help them [refugees] on site’. (...) When I confronted the boy during a personal conversation, he just said ‘This is coming from my grandfather, you should have heard him’.”

The young boy that is described here tries to defend himself by saying that the way he talks about refugees is far from as bad as how his grandfather talks about this. Saying ‘let’s help them on site’ is not traditionally racist, but it has become a typical phrase concerning refugees in populist rhetoric, such as by the Sweden Democrats. It is, however, the school employee that characterizes the boy’s language as ‘SD rhetoric’ and not himself. This exemplifies a second problematization.

2. *Growth of the Sweden Democrats*

During the same conversation, an additional motivation for implementing the Tolerance Project was given. “The SD was at around 20 percent and there were few immigrants here beforehand” (informant 4). Problematizing the growth of the Sweden Democrats in the local area (*tettsted*) is, similarly to the first problem representation, combined with the establishment of new refugee reception centres and the potential tension that can arise from this. During the conversation, I was shown statistics of low levels of higher education in the specific area compared to other areas within the same municipality, and the school employee pointed to a “lack of research on socio-cultural factors, life stories and such” (informant 4). While this is a problematization of socio-economic relations and not necessarily the SD, a municipality employee involved in the same decision-making process (informant 10), linked the two elements together when we talked about the specific implementation.

“We wanted to find a way to get at them (...) the Sweden Democrats is not Nazism, but it captures discontent in the local environment, for example in the old industrial towns where the women have gone to study or get a career, while the men are left unemployed and bitter. People in the countryside vote SD all over Sweden.”

As with generational racism, the growth of the SD is here seen as a small-town phenomenon. The same motivation is given when I talk to a municipality employee (informant 13) active in the implementation of the Tolerance Project in a neighbouring non-urban area.

“We wanted to make sure that there is no breeding ground for the Swedish Resistance Movement (now the NMR) for example, but also for the Sweden Democrats because they have Nazism as their foundation: we want them extinct.”

The underlying assumption that legitimizes this condemnation is ‘once a racist party; always a racist party’, as in the governmental *cordon sanitaire* (Löow 2009). Concern related to the growth of the SD was predominately expressed by municipality workers, but shown by the Tolerance Project leaders as well, by referring to some of the pupils in the group as having an “SD parent”. This alludes to the problem of generational racism as well: that parents will pass on negative attitudes to their children. In all the meetings I attended, there was no mention of any other party affiliations among the pupils’ parents. Whether the problematization of the growth of SD will continue to be reproduced or will be disrupted depends largely on the extent of SD’s continued polishing of its image and legitimacy nationwide, as well as the growing presence and visibility of the NMR constituting even more concern.

3. Normalization of Racist Language

A more immediate motivation for implementing the Tolerance Project was because of the “amount of racist statements heard in the hallways” (informant 4). Tolerance Project leaders frequently mentioned the use of negative language related to newly arrived immigrants and how teachers should handle it. The current situation was explained as being tense and consisting of “two camps at school, even among the teachers” (local meeting 2). One of the pedagogues expressed her concern in the following manner: “racial stuff appears all the time (...) what do you do...the place is permeated by this... a normalization of language use” (local meeting 2). The existence of two camps among school staff was exemplified by an ongoing discussion about whether to arrange a basic values day (*verdigrunndag*) when the new refugees were set to arrive. This had been suggested by a teacher at the school who was not involved in the Tolerance Project. The group present at the local TP meeting agreed that “it would only lead to more special treatment and targeting” (local meeting 2). If the school staff did not agree among themselves on questions of how to handle the newly arrived refugees, they believed it would cause further problems: “as teachers, we need to agree on these things so that some pupils don’t exploit the ambiguity and direct their concerns [related to refugees] toward other teachers” (local meeting 2). In other

words, the concern that is expressed in this meeting is not just with some of the pupils, but also with some of the school staff.

Another point on problematizing the normalization of racist language was that it might not be known in advance, but become apparent with the arrival of new refugees at school. A project leader from another municipality (informant 18) reported on the appearance of unexpected racist language. “Now that we have been working [with the TP] for a while, the attitudes appear ... from the normal youth, brown [racist] attitudes, you feel naïve.” The underlying assumption of problematizing the normalization of racist language is the idea of a snowball effect; the more racist utterances flourish, the more people sympathize with them. The ‘pressure cooker theory’, on the other hand, emphasizes the idea that the more racial expressions are marginalized, the more extreme and expressive forms they assume once they find a place where they can be expressed (Ravndal 2017: 153). While allowing extreme attitudes to be heard is a central point of the Tolerance Project in theory, I did not hear this point in the discussions among the project leaders I met with. As with the problem of generational racism and the growth of the SD, problematizing the normalization of racist language has come about through a pro-immigration discourse, where anti-immigrant attitudes are labelled as deviating from the norm and hence need to be prevented.

4. ‘At-risk’ Youth

When discussing exactly which pupils are to be encouraged to apply for the Tolerance Projects, the teachers and social workers use the category *behövs elever*, literally ‘pupils in need’, meaning those who have a need for special attention or monitoring to prevent further social unrest at school. In both regional meetings and conversations with project leaders, the actual work they did was mainly understood to be a way of helping some of the pupils who otherwise would be struggling, either due to a learning difficulty or for social behavioural reasons, to finish school. “Pupils in need can for example be those who cannot write or express themselves in writing. Just that they get through the school with grades [is a desired outcome]” (informant 3). In this way, they conceive of the work that is done through the TP to

be not much different from crime prevention in general and the role of school to foster democracy and guide children on the path to adulthood. “It is about making youngsters prepared to make wise choices in life” (informant 2). From my own observations of a project group before and after, and the many stories I have heard, emancipating pupils with low self-esteem and trouble coping with school was a frequent element. A girl who did not speak in front of the class for eight years changed tremendously: “now she suddenly speaks, her parents even came to thank us” (informant 16). As indicated in many defector stories and the national action plan against extremism, low self-esteem is seen as one of the breeding grounds for the White Power environment (Government Offices of Sweden 2011: 18).

Reference to the NMR and the SD appeared less often when my informants talked about ‘pupils in need’, as the focus was more on the individual needs and actual problems at school. A frequent discussion topic among the project leaders was whether or not they had successfully recruited the pupils they initially thought could benefit the most from participating in the program. At some of the schools, the most troublesome kids had not applied for the program or had quit after a few weeks. Although this was sometimes the case, several of the project leaders emphasized that close friends of the so-called ‘pupils in need’ often joined. The underlying assumption was the potential spiralling effects of working preventively, creating a “culture of tolerance” at school (informant 2) or educating “ambassadors of tolerance” (informant 8). This is in accordance with the national perspective on safeguarding democracy (Government Offices of Sweden 2017; Government Offices of Sweden 2011). In this sense, the Tolerance Project can be argued to function as an extension of the schools’ general preventive arm.

Discussion

By listening to my informants’ naturally occurring talk about their motivations for implementing or working with the Tolerance Project, I have traced how the problem of racism and intolerance is perceived by front-line professionals in one specific preventive setting and

location. The findings I have presented are clearly limited to the timing of the implementation of the Tolerance Project, firstly as a response to the national growth of the Sweden Democrats in 2014 and secondly influenced by the national refugee crisis in 2015. Another context-specific limitation of these findings is the local history underlying the problematization of generational racism, in that specific region.

Most people I talked to were well aware of the historical existence of National Socialism in the specific region and in particular smaller areas. This most likely shaped their self-understanding and made them alert to potential threats of this kind. Effectively the mere awareness of a local racist past motivates front-line professionals to prevent future racism. It also suggests that pupils who are known to have racist parents or grandparents could be targets of intervention. As mentioned, the geographic stronghold theory must, however, be further explored to determine whether this is a real or perceived problem and whether there is any direct link between “old racists” and current forms of hostility toward immigrants.

I was initially surprised to discover the extent to which the growth of Sweden Democrats was problematized when discussing implementation of a program to reduce recruitment to racist and Nazi organizations, considering that the SD is a democratically elected parliamentary party. On the other hand, condemnation of the party’s anti-immigrant propaganda and rhetoric has been the established norm in Swedish politics for as long as the party has existed. The racist label should thus come as no surprise for anyone who is a member or supporter of the SD; the question is whether this affects their children. A potential effect of problematizing the growth of the SD is that project leaders automatically label pupils with SD parent(s) as part of the target group for participating in the Tolerance Project. One of the municipality employees (informant 10) confirmed that there is a risk that pupils of SD parents might be targeted more often for participation in the program, but I have not gathered any data over time that supports this hypothesis, or whether this is a good or bad thing. As my findings show, most of the pedagogues who work with the Tolerance Project provide several other reasons for why certain pupils should participate.

Problematizing the normalization of racist language closely resembles the broad definition of racism that is found in the critical race theory framework and the Swedish plan against racism, xenophobia and hate crime (Government Offices of Sweden 2017). As with the first two problematizations, normalization of racist language was argued to be heightened with the establishment of new refugee reception centres and the arrival of refugees in the local areas and at school. Specific examples of this were often presented in the form of second-hand information, such as the story from the kindergarten and the number of racial expressions that were heard in the hallway. Some of my informants mentioned witnessing wisecracks directed at or intended for some of the newly arrived refugees, but missing from the discussions were actual episodes of hate crimes or recent racially motivated violence in the area.

Generational racism, the growth of the SD and normalization of racist language have in common the assumption that expressions of scepticism about immigrants in the young as well as in the adult populations is either a forerunner for engagement with racist organizations or expressions of racism today, and thus something to be prevented. The pro-immigrant discourse that was expressed by the Tolerance Project leaders is in line with a long tradition in Sweden of taking in refugees and promoting a multicultural society (Borevi 2012). The more the Swedish government regulates and restricts immigration, the more this tradition can potentially be disrupted. The first three problematizations also have in common that they complicate the government's youth-focused approach and expose a limitation for the role of the school in prevention, as adults cannot be targeted by schools apart from through their children. In line with prior critique of the national action plan (Löow et al. 2013), I recommend that future plans take this into consideration.

Problematizing youth 'at-risk' corresponds to the national action plan against violence-promoting extremism (Government Offices of Sweden 2011), in the way that it suggests that some individuals are more prone to become radicalized than others, depending on their social or personal background. Front-line professionals working with the Tolerance Project do not, however, distinguish between 'signs of radicalization' and signs of failing in

adult life due to learning difficulties or for social behavioural reasons at school. In other words, the responsibility to prevent racism is not seen as distinct from the general mandate to foster and safeguard democracy. It should be noted that the Tolerance Project was developed long before the national security discourse tied the role of teachers to preventing radicalization, and is thus based on the basic principle of schools preparing children for adult democratic life and preventing traditional racism and intolerance.

Conclusion

In this article, I have applied a ‘What’s the problem represented to be’ approach to analyse material gathered from fieldwork with a group of front-line professionals working to prevent racism and intolerance in a Swedish region. To sum up, the local versions of the Tolerance Project that I have studied operate with a conglomeration of problematizations, of which I have presented four ideal types. There is every reason to believe that additional problem descriptions exist within the group I have studied and especially in other preventive environments. The point has been to show that front-line professionals interpret their role in prevention based on local problem analysis and not predominately on national recommendations. This means that, although national action plans might seem oversimplified at first glance, there is not a one-to-one transmission of the seemingly simplistic suggestions, especially not when interpreted by a group of front-line professionals specifically dedicated to the task. The overall effect of the various problematizations is to create a broad and varied target group, thus minimizing the potential stigmatization of some pupils that might have resulted if the project had focused only on one problem or one narrowly defined target group. Because of this, it is my argument that the model, consisting of a trained group of professionals working with a selected and most importantly mixed group of pupils, is well suited to prevent all forms of radicalization. In an upcoming article I will account for what is going on in the TP sessions and which understandings of socialization the program represents.

I also recommend further studies to be made on the Tolerance Project and other preventive initiatives.

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