

## Training education professionals to build communities through art, cinema and digital technologies for preventing anti-social behaviour in youngsters.

## La formazione dei professioni dell'educazione per creare comunità attraverso l'arte, il cinema, le tecnologie digitali per prevenire i comportamenti antisociali nei giovani.

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### ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Il presente contributo mira a focalizzare l'attenzione sull'importanza di una formazione lungo l'arco della vita per i professionisti dell'educazione in Italia, con particolare riferimento agli insegnanti della scuola secondaria, agli educatori, ai formatori e a tutti colori che lavorano con i giovani. A tal fine, sono presentate due esperienze progettuali internazionali, "CommUnity" e "DIVE IN", condotte dall'Università di Firenze nell'ambito di partenariati europei. Tali contesti di ricerca hanno promosso la formazione dei professionisti dell'educazione tramite l'intreccio di metodologie basate sull'arte e sulla creatività unite alla strategia blended learning, e alla presentazione di casi di studio, e hanno consentito di attuare percorsi di approfondimento sul tema della prevenzione dei comportamenti antisociali dei giovani in Europa sia per gli studenti universitari, futuri educatori, sia per gli insegnanti in servizio.

### ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the importance of lifelong learning for education professionals with reference to secondary school teachers, educators, trainers, and all those who work with young people. In this perspective, there are two international project experiences, which are "CommUnity" and "DIVE IN", conducted by the University of Florence within European partnership. These research contexts have promoted the training of the education professionals through the interweaving of art-based and creativity approaches combined with the blended learning strategy and the presentation of case studies. The Projects that are presented have been implemented in-depth courses about preventing antisocial behaviour among young people in Europe for both university students, future educators, and in-service teachers.

### Risk factors that can influence marginalisation processes in young people

The complexity of radicalisation and youth extremism certainly requires a systemic approach involving various educational agencies, starting with the family, with the understanding that there can be no 'standard solution' that can be applied in every context. Radicalisation is a dynamic process, not necessarily linear, which may be slow and gradual or, on the contrary, manifest itself suddenly and explosively.

This kind of process, in some cases, may be generated by external influences, such as a charismatic leader or a group dynamic, in others it may take place as an internal process of self-radicalisation, perhaps triggered by engaging events and content such as those accessible via Internet, in conjunction with individual personal factors. In some studies, looking at what influences young people, it is pointed out that feelings of injustice and resentment can be triggered by familiar tragic events, by viewing online content that recalls and reinforces frustrations and discrimination suffered (Bouzar & Martin, 2016; Schuurman & Horgan, 2016).

In order to understand the environmental and social factors, the studies developed by Marc Sageman (2004; 2011; 2016) are relevant. By analysing public documents related to hundreds of cases of al-Qaeda militants, he found that most of them came from middle-class, secularised and educated families, and possessed a university-level education, but without having attained skilled jobs. Rare were the cases of previous delinquency. The author defines the radicalisation of these subjects as a process characterised by a sense of belonging to the group and to the cause, with a path shared through social networks (Laurano & Anzera, 2017).

Among the models applicable to understanding the phenomenon of radicalisation is Sageman's (2004, 2011) 'bunch of guys' theory, according to which radicalisation originates from close-knit groups and common social connections. The author states that the path to political violence is a collective path, not an individual one, even for so-called 'lone wolves' (Sageman, 2016, p. 6). Approaching extremist ideologies or radicalised groups, therefore, could occur through family relationships, or through individuals growing up in the same neighbourhood, attending the same school, the same places of worship or playing sports together (Atran, 2008).

The causes may be marginalisation, social isolation, lack of integration, lack of recognition of one's cultural roots, failure at school and communication problems in the family and social context.

The influence of the social context refers to the way in which individuals change and adapt their behaviour according to the demands of the situation. For example, kinship and friendship are recruitment factors that sometimes even outweigh other environmental factors such as social exclusion.

There is no common pattern of activation and progression towards radicalisation but rather a kaleidoscope of factors that may or may not manifest themselves, with greater or lesser intensity, in an individual. And the emerging picture, as in the kaleidoscope, is different for everyone. Therefore, the process of radicalisation is extremely personalised and situated. According to this point of view, it is necessary to work on prevention, to develop critical and reflective thinking with respect to the issues that characterise contemporary difficulties to go through them with the students during specific activities. It is important to initiate subjects into the ability to listen, recognise and understand ideas and others' views of the world. This involves realising and being able to overcome the contradictions and conflicts that characterise the plurality of cultural and religious viewpoints in society.

The group of minors with anti-social attitudes is made up of individuals in conflict with themselves and with society, not necessarily with economic problems, but in some cases also from affluent families, who want to manage their discomfort and frustration. These antisocial behaviours are emblematic of a real difficulty in social integration and acceptance of socially shared rules. Consequently, this discomfort leads, if not adequately addressed, to deviance and antisociality. The testimonies of the students and teachers involved in the European project “CommUnity – Build Community – Create Peace!” (2019-2021) showed how important it is to build communities of young people who share a passion for cinema and who can establish and consolidate social relationships with each other in order to facilitate their sense of social inclusion and belonging (Huion et al., 2021).

The “CommUnity” project aimed precisely at the prevention of extremism, radicalisation and anti-social behaviour in Europe and was funded precisely with the purpose of increasing social cohesion and a sense of belonging among young people. Belgium, France, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands joined the project. It is based on enhancing intercultural dialogue and community building among young people and vulnerable sections of the population through the sharing of cultural and artistic forms of expression.

### **The ‘cinema club’ as methodological approach for building community through art and creativity. The experience of the European Project “CommUnity”**

The ‘cinema club’ (1) focused on two different target groups: secondary school students, aged 16 to 19, in two different Tuscan schools, with a strong presence of young people with a migrant background, and university students enrolled in the courses of study in Educational Sciences and Humanities for Communication.

The meetings were mainly held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the distance mode enabled a high number of participants to be reached with better results. The evaluation of the activities developed was based on the results of the Google Form satisfaction questionnaires that were proposed immediately after the viewing of each film, and on the discussions that took place at the end of each viewing. These tools were used to verify the achievement of the project’s objectives. In addition, items were prepared to detect whether the viewing of the films proposed, and the subsequent discussion-debate had aroused in the young people’s critical reflections on conflicts and on the possibilities of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, as well as on the risks of extremist and violent ideologies, including the risks and consequences of Islamophobia. Cinema is a universal language, it brings people together, and in this case, seeing a film, reflecting and commenting on it was a way for all the students to be involved and to be able to interact beyond their knowledge, skills and difficulties, allowing them to confront each other by imagining possible alternatives to the behaviour and solutions undertaken by the protagonists of the films, to accustom young people to finding multiple solutions to real situations.

The main educational aims of the school ‘cinema club’ are related to the improvement of young people’s ability to process meanings and critical thinking from the multi-sensory

stimulation of films. In order to achieve a climate of sharing, reflection and free interpretation of reality, a favourable, free, inclusive and welcoming environment must be created. This makes it possible to soften the differences perceived by students among peers within the school context, and delegated to ethnic and cultural background, language, religion, gender.

It is possible indeed to speak of "educating to differences" through film screening. Therefore, using the practice of filmmaking means valuing cultural differences but also working on the possibility of building effective relationships.

University students attended six film viewing sessions and returned 731 questionnaires between the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. The discussions and questionnaires revealed a shared satisfaction with having participated in the events and discussed with peers on issues very close to their own reality.

It emerged from the questionnaires that many students had experienced situations of discomfort, especially in adolescence, in connection with discrimination of various kinds (due to physical appearance, communication difficulties, social integration or schooling) that had conditioned their lives for sometimes for prolonged periods. Many of them managed to overcome these difficulties thanks to the closeness and support of their peers or important adult reference figures. In many cases, students reported experiences of marginality observed among their peers. This further demonstrates the need to create opportunities for peers to meet and foster their social integration.

The experience realised through the 12 "cinema clubs" showed how to debate among young people, after sharing a film's vision, can be an effective way to initiate the development of critical and reflective thinking. The activity also made it possible to create a welcoming space for listening, to strengthen resilience skills and to offer alternative narratives that guide young people towards interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the promotion of human rights and democratic values. Educating to differences, therefore, using the practice of filmmaking means valuing cultural differences but also working on the possibility of building effective relationships.

Feedback gathered in the university and secondary school courses through the administration of questionnaires and the organisation of 12 debates at the end of each film revealed broad participation. In relation to the activities implemented in secondary schools, 556 students (16-19 years old) participated, and 243 questionnaires were returned. Through the questionnaires filled in and the discussions carried out at the end of the films, it emerged that the secondary school students considered it extremely necessary and useful to have this space for discussion in order to address, together with their peers and teachers, issues and problems that they feel are very close to them, such as the risk of social exclusion and marginalisation, conflicts between and within groups, forms of juvenile deviance, racism and bullying.

### **Preventing radicalisation phenomena in young people through innovative training processes**

The education professionals play a fundamental role in the prevention of violent extremism, through a constant commitment to generate in young people a sense of

belonging to a global humanity and the construction of open societies capable of understanding and dealing with contemporary complexity (UNESCO, 2017). For this reason, it is essential to provide specific training aimed at professionals who work in close contact with young people so that the correct interpretation of the phenomena allows the development of prevention strategies to be implemented in educational contexts (Proli, 2021). For example, teachers who work and interact with young people can see first-hand the effects and consequences that the various extremist ideologies, also spread online, can have on young people and, in their pedagogical actions, contribute to transforming the individual into a conscious subject capable of undertaking experiences and relationships in an intentional and planned manner (Biagioli, 2019; Biagioli & Proli, 2021). Educational action, in the intercultural perspective, is built on complex actions that affect the school in its entirety, as a place designated to the education of all and everyone, including families, not only in multicultural and multiethnic contexts: this implies the redesigning of curricula in an intercultural key and the renewal of teaching methodologies, as well as a rethinking of functions and spaces (Biagioli, 2019). Teachers' practices must contribute to the development of dialogic identities, so as to ensure successful intercultural communication along the trajectories of solidarity and social justice (Tarozzi, 2015).

In June 2016, the European Council, and the representatives of the governments of the Member States published a key document on the role of youth education in preventing and combating violent radicalisation in an integrated and cross-sectoral approach (European Union, 2016). This text emphasises how the complexity of violent extremism and its profound impact on society requires an integrated and cross-sectoral approach from the local to the European level involving various sectors and actors, including youth work, youth-led organisations and schools. The document also highlights how youth and education policies should be tuned to policies, tools and activities of other relevant sectors, such as early warning, intervention and effective countering of radicalisation. In this way, action can be taken from a youth, peer, family and social network perspective. This vision requires the implementation of diversified strategies, ranging from prevention in the early stages of radicalisation to a more targeted intervention aimed at specific individuals or groups when the phenomenon occurs (*ibid.*).

In this perspective, the European Project "DIVE IN - Preventing Violent Radicalisation Among Young Individuals in Europe by Innovative Training Approaches" (2019-2021), aims to support local actors working with young people, enhancing their knowledge and skills to prevent and counter radicalisation. In fact, in many European countries, violent extremism, whether religious or political in nature, has become a growing problem, especially among younger segments of the population. The program aims to design and test a *blended learning* training course based on 'situated learning', and to set up an online hub for local actors, also open to other EU Member States, where the outcomes of the training carried out can be shared in a common space that fosters discussion and cooperation on issues of preventing anti-social behaviour and extremism in Europe.

On the basis of the needs analysis conducted in 4 partner countries (Austria, Greece, Italy, Spain), it emerged that the main needs of education professionals are: to deepen concepts related to interculturality in social and educational contexts; to know how to

manage diversity in specific work environments; to understand the psychological aspects of identity recognition, sense of belonging, and social cohesion; to understand some social interactions and the influence of the social environment; to know the mechanisms of online recruitment and radicalisation; to know the tools and strategies to identify and prevent the first signs of antisocial behaviour in work environments. The planned training is aimed at teachers, trainers and educators whom are active in adult education and vocational schooling, as well as guidance counsellors and staff working for social inclusion in four partner Countries, and in the associated Countries that can act as multipliers (Germany, France, Norway).

The training modules developed focus on the role and importance of interculturality, the centrality of social groupings, the topicality of the Internet as a potential channel for extremism, the identification of risky behaviour and the possibility of setting up a coexistence plan to prevent and counter violent extremism. According to this perspective, course participants learn actively within a participative context: the individual who learns does not acquire a defined amount of abstract knowledge that he or she will then drop into other contexts but develops the ability to act by engaging in the relevant context (Lave & Wenger, 2006). For this reason, simulations and case studies of real-life contexts are offered in the Course, it is based on a bottom-up approach, in fact, the design was preceded by a needs analysis of a sample of education professionals carried out through questionnaires and two focus groups conducted in each involved Countries.

The international research team of the “DIVE IN” (2) project implemented the training plan organised in learning units (learning outcomes) for a total of 90 hours of *blend learning* delivered through a dedicated online platform. In Italy (Tuscany), a piloting was carried out in two phases: the first one (December 2020) during which 14 secondary school teachers and 1 school manager were trained, and the second (May 2021) during which those trained in the first phase became trainers of 46 secondary school teachers in the provinces of Florence, Livorno, Pisa and Arezzo. In total, 187 education professionals were trained in Austria, Greece, Italy and Spain. At the end of the two pilot phases, a satisfaction questionnaire was administered, and the responses of the Italian teachers whom were involved showed that 80% of them would like to have an ongoing training on the topics presented in the Course, which are considered highly topical and strongly needed for schools in multicultural contexts; 40% of them expressed a desire to improve their ability to recognise and support young people at risk of radicalisation.

### **The “DIVE IN” e-learning platform as hub for the education professionals training in Europe**

With a view to blended learning, the program developed a Training Centre consisting of five autonomous training modules, which can be approached independently from each other and without following a predefined chronological order, for a total of 60 hours of distance learning training. The following is a summary of the training objectives that guided the design of the modules in the “DIVE IN” Training Centre (Table 1).

**TAB. 1 - SUMMARY OF THE THEMES, CONTENTS AND METHODOLOGIES PRESENTED IN THE TRAINING MODULES**

Module 1 – “The Internet”	It focuses on the critical issues that inappropriate use of the Internet can entail for young people, becoming a potential gateway to terrorism and a channel of communication between extremist groups. The theoretical references and methodologies proposed offer the opportunity to delve into the mechanisms of online recruitment and radicalisation, and to improve the ability to recognise the signs of extremism present on the web.
Module 2 – “Interculturality”	Interculturality is a transversal theme as it addresses the issue of ethnic and cultural difference from an educational perspective and illustrates how difference can be dealt with in educational contexts. In the module, methodologies are implemented that emphasise in-depth study of useful strategies for fostering empathy and active listening in multicultural contexts, recalling concepts such as cultural intelligence and cultural sensitivity.
Module 3 – “Prevention Measures”	This module offers practical suggestions on how to develop activities and strategies to prevent radicalisation in one’s own organisation and provides the opportunity to put into practice in project form what has been learnt in the previous modules. This training unit offers the opportunity to deepen some key concepts to elaborate a strategy through research methods for data collection and context analysis, declination of objectives and evaluation of the impact of the same strategy in the target institution.
Module 4 – “Detecting Risky Behaviour”	In this context, possible risk signals in behaviour and communication among young people through verbal and non-verbal language are highlighted, in order to understand how certain attitudes can degenerate into violent and radicalising conduct.
Module 5 – “Social Grouping”	The module presents the topic of social groups, social inclusion and exclusion and the consequences of the latter, especially regarding the risks of anti-social behaviour and radicalisation. Key aspects for understanding certain social interactions such as the influence of groups on individuals in the development of radical attitude are highlighted. Reflection on the psychological aspects of identity recognition, sense of belonging and social cohesion is stimulated.

The course participants, in the piloting phase, learned in an active way within a participative context that prioritised the acquisition of competences and skills to be able to act in the context of reference. For this reason, simulations and case studies were offered in the training course, with a bottom-up approach, trying to respond to the training needs that emerged from the survey carried out through focus groups involving a sample of

education professionals (secondary school teachers, educators, psychologists, socio-cultural workers, etc.).

The blended learning modality used for the delivery of the “DIVE IN” Course allowed for the differentiation of teaching materials and proposed training activities using multiple digital tools. The trainees whom were participating in the two pilot phases were involved in self-study and self-assessment activities as an in-progress formative evaluation. The second phase of the piloting involved five secondary schools in Tuscany (Provinces of Florence, Livorno and Pisa) that organised the “DIVE IN” training conducted by the teachers who were trained in the first piloting phase and who became trainers of their colleagues. In this second phase, 46 teachers were trained and received a certificate attesting to the skills obtained in relation to the training modules carried out by each.

From the suggestions collected in the 42 final self-assessment questionnaires administered to the teachers who completed the training course, it emerged that most of the participants (80%) would like to have ongoing training on the topics of preventing anti-social behaviour and interculturalism, which are considered highly topical and strongly needed for schools in multicultural contexts. Some teachers (40%) expressed a desire to improve their ability to recognise and support young people at risk of radicalisation. Regarding the use of the “DIVE IN” Training Centre, most teachers (85%) stated that the materials and activities proposed were easily accessible and very useful regarding their professionalism.

Furthermore, the analysis of the 46 self-assessment questionnaires administered before and after the training assessed a general increase in knowledge related to the proposed topics with a 25% to 50% improvement depending on the topics.

The teachers involved were also able to express comments and suggestions through open-ended questions, and from their answers it emerged that the school must be a model of democracy and tolerance, and this entails not only the training of teachers, and the development of teaching activities that propose a non-violent culture, but also the creation of safe spaces for listening and reflection within it where young people can channel their frustrations and concerns.

## Conclusions

The promotion of lifelong learning in Europe has become a key issue both for strengthening international economic competitiveness and for reducing inequalities and maintaining social cohesion. For this reason, investing in the training of education professionals can contribute to the prevention of the number of violent actions due to extremism of various kinds, racism, xenophobia, through the capacity of trained professionals in helping to combat stereotypes, increase social inclusion, raise awareness about the ways and contexts of spreading extremist ideologies and hate speech, offline and online (Guerrini & Proli, 2021). One of the challenges faced by the European projects “CommUnity” and “DIVE IN” is to propose a competence-centered training model for professionals belonging to different educational contexts (teachers, educators, psychologists, volunteers, counsellors...) who share the fact that they work on social

relations, mediation and are involved as educational professionals in a political dimension (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2002).

Through training, it is possible to improve the perception of radicalisation phenomena and to foster links and synergy between local actors. From this point of view, it is necessary to consider that, in addition to psychological skills (listening, communication, empathy...) and specific skills for carrying out one's role (e.g: didactic-methodological for teachers), intercultural competences are needed (Portera, 2013; Reggio & Santerini, 2014; Muscarà, 2017) in order to understand cultures, reduce prejudices, search for shared horizons and promote equal and inclusive relations between members of different cultures and communities (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2021), in order to promote the formation of young people willing to confront diversity and question stereotypes and commonplaces (Guerrini & Proli, 2021).

### Note degli autori

The contribution is the result of joint work by the authors. In particular, Raffaella Biagioli wrote the abstract and paragraphs *Risk factors that can influence marginalisation processes in young people* and *The 'cinema club' as methodological approach for building community through art and creativity. The experience of the European Project "CommUnity"*; Maria Grazia Proli wrote paragraphs *Preventing radicalisation phenomena in young people through innovative training processes; The "DIVE IN" e-learning platform as hub for the education professionals training in Europe* and Conclusion.

### Note

- (1) The research was conducted by the scientific team of Florence University coordinated by Raffaella Biagioli, with the collaboration of Dr. Valentina Guerrini e Dr. Maria Grazia Proli.
- (2) The University of Florence, Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology is a partner in the Project through the scientific team coordinated by Raffaella Biagioli.

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