

Chapter 4: Effective International and Multicultural Practices in Schools and Society

Addressing Societal Polarisation in Maltese Schools through Experimental Laboratories

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Abstract

Maltese society is experiencing an increase in its diversity due to a booming economy and the position of the country in the Mediterranean, which are bringing different waves of migration to the island. Difficulties in the integration of these communities with the local community and tensions among them are some of the consequences of this phenomenon. Schools are in particular an important environment in which these tensions manifest themselves, and children from different backgrounds are increasingly polarized. Moreover, Malta, similar to the rest of Europe, is also increasingly more exposed to radical ideologies of various types, which are contributing to social polarisation. Furthermore, young people are often made more vulnerable and at risk of being exposed to these ideologies because of their intense use of social media. As part of the ARMOUR project, we have carried out qualitative research with first-line practitioners working with children and young people, including teachers, social workers, youth workers and police. The findings showed that practitioners are not prepared for this change and often are lacking the skills for properly addressing the ever-increasing polarisation. Teachers in particular called for increased training on how to address societal polarisation and encourage integration and inclusion in schools. Following the approach promoted by RAN EDU (Nordbruch 2016) the ARMOUR project has developed a series of exercises that – when used by first-line practitioners – can empower children and young people, making them less vulnerable to extreme ideologies, through the development and strengthening of critical thinking, as well as basic life skills and social competencies that are essential for active citizenship.

Keywords:

social polarisation, radicalisation, violent extremism, prevention, children, young people, first-line practitioners, education

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Introduction

Over the years, Malta has experienced an increase in the diversity of its population. This is due to a number of different reasons, including a booming economy, and the position of the island in the centre of the Mediterranean, which are bringing different waves of migration to the country. The total share of foreign nationals in Malta has been steadily increasing, from 9% in 2014, to 11% in 2016 and 14% in 2018 (Eurostat 2020). The largest group of migrants are EU nationals (38,563) which represent 57.4% of foreigners in Malta, while non-EU nationals constitute the remaining 42.6% (28,582) (Eurostat 2020).

However, this change in the demographics of the country has also led to difficulties in the integration of the new migrant groups with the Maltese community, something one can observe in many different settings and situations. The integration challenges range from logistical problems (e.g. governmental agencies dealing with migrant groups require more interpreters) to ideological problems, namely the rise of an anti-migration discourse both offline and online. More and more the rhetoric around the boat arrivals of asylum-seekers, especially far-right discourse such as the one promoted by Moviment Patrijotti Maltin and Imperium Europa has them portrayed as an invasion of Malta by foreign individuals with nefarious intentions. This discourse, which was once limited to the outskirts of politics, is slowly but certainly gaining ground, as reflected by the recent political results achieved by Norman Lowell's party, which gained 3.2% of the votes in the 2019 European Elections, becoming the third party behind the Labour and Nationalist Parties (Times of Malta 2019c).

The rise of far-right discourse, coupled with significant discontentment on the side of the migrants related to the asylum regime and material conditions, has contributed to an increase in inter-community tensions in Malta. Several notable events over the past year have shown the extent of these tensions: in April 2019, a migrant from Cote d'Ivoire was shot on the road leading to the biggest reception centre on the island (Hal Far Open Centre) in what has been considered the first hate murder in Malta (Times of Malta 2019b). For the whole year 2019, and in the beginning of 2020, there were

riots and protests taking place in open centres and reception centres hosting migrants in Hal Far, Marsa and Safi, against the over-crowding of these centres and poor living conditions offered to migrants (Times of Malta 2019d; Times of Malta 2020). In parallel, the island has witnessed an increase in radical discourse targeting migrants in a number of popular online groups in Malta as well as in the comments' sections of articles discussing the migration problem in leading Maltese newspapers (Times of Malta 2018; Times of Malta 2019e).

These problems have also been evident in other settings and have affected the whole society. For example, in February 2019, at Pembroke Secondary School, which has a high percentage of foreign students, tensions between two students – a Libyan and a Maltese – ended in violence, in an incident which also involved the parents of one of the students concerned (Times of Malta 2019a). Several similar instances were reported by teachers in schools, who expressed their concerns about this rising phenomenon and asked for better instruments to deal with these instances (Times of Malta 2019a).

These integration difficulties experienced in the educational sector have refuelled the debate on the need for a long-term plan for the integration of migrant children, which should include more and better support for teachers, social workers and other first-line practitioners working with youth (Martinelli 2006; KOPIN 2008).

However, despite efforts from the Maltese government to improve policies for integration and promote social cohesion, the country is becoming increasingly divided and such strategies are still not in place or have not been fully implemented. Within the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, the Directorate for Human Rights and Integration designed an Integration Strategy 2017–2020 and created a unit focused particularly on integration of migrants (MEDE 2017). Although the strategy is coming to the end, the results especially in the field of mainstream education are not very clear, and there is an urgent need for action in this area to prevent tensions which could lead to further polarisation of the different groups. This is especially so since the increased societal polarisation makes Malta become more vulnerable to

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the appeal of radical ideologies.

Though polarization is encountered across society, one social category of particular concern is children and young people, who because of their level of emotional development, the impact of peer pressure and their extensive use of social media are particularly vulnerable to radicalization. On the other hand, schools have long been considered laboratories of democracies, due to the role they play in educating the new generation of citizens. When considering these two facts together, it quickly becomes clear that one key area of intervention should be the school environment and the polarizing factors encountered there. This can be done either by working directly with the individuals affected (in this case children and young people) or through first-line practitioners who work closely with children and young people and can assist them in developing the necessary skills to make them impervious to the attractiveness of extreme ideologies.

The ARMOUR Project (“A Radical Model Of Resilience For Young Minds”) follows the second path – that of working with first-line practitioners – and it is based on the belief that schools are vital in supporting children and young people and in creating a positive learning environment. As a Radicalisation Awareness Network’s paper outlined, there are many skills that teachers can foster in children and young people to prevent polarisation and encourage the healthy development of students, including critical thinking, as well as basic life skills and social competencies that are essential for active citizenship (Nordbruch 2016).

One novel way, in which ARMOUR contributes to the reduction of societal polarization are Experimental Laboratories. These laboratories provide a trusted environment where teachers as well as other practitioners (e.g. youth workers, social workers, law enforcement personnel, health workers) learn together exercises and techniques on how to teach children and teens critical thinking, anger management, emotional intelligence, how to help them deal with conflicting identities and resolve conflicts. By using these tools, first-line practitioners are able to foster a more inclusive environment in schools and the wider society and discourage polarisation between different groups

and cultures.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of the literature surrounding radicalisation and societal polarisation and the theories on skills development necessary for the prevention of violent extremism. In the second section, the findings of the research phase of the project in the Maltese context are outlined, and then linked in the third section to an explanation of the methodology of the Experimental Laboratories and the theory behind their design. The conclusion will finally bring together how the methodology employed in the ARMOUR project can be useful in the Maltese educational context and how it can be incorporated into the activities of first-line practitioners.

Societal Polarisation, Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

The concept of societal polarisation as employed in the project was first developed in relation to the distribution of income and income inequalities (Duclos et al. 2004; Esteban and Ray 1994; Wolfson 1994). It can however be applied to many different issues, including ideology, religion and economic status, as it results from the interaction of within-group identity and across-group alienation (Karatrantos 2018). When societal polarisation occurs, group members identify with each other, while they feel socially or ideologically separated from members of other groups. As the level of polarisation increases, tensions and distance across the groups will also increase as they cluster around distant poles (Karatrantos 2018). In the case of Malta, increasing distance between the Maltese community and the foreign population feeds into mistrust between the two groups and results in the increasing tensions that have taken place over the past years.

As societal polarisation leads individuals to distant poles, this will drive them to identify with more radical ideologies and groups, which can be led either by religion or political beliefs. In the ARMOUR project, polarisation is seen as both a mental construct and multidimensional phenomenon generated by the inability of multiple social actors to properly address sensitive issues in the public spaces, like those motivated by

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cultural, economic and political discourse, narratives within the migration context, hate speech and many others. In the case of Malta, children and young people are exposed to negative narratives surrounding the migration crisis often portrayed as an attack on Maltese identity, which might drive them towards extreme political groups such as Imperium Europa. On the other hand, children and teens coming from a non-Maltese background may react to the spread of far-right ideas and the pressure of integration by moving towards a more extreme national and religious identity. Thus, the distance between societal groups increases, pushing individuals towards ideological extremes and possibly to violent actions.

Nevertheless, one must remember that radicalisation is in itself a controversial term and there is a lack of a consensus on definitions (Schmid 2013). The definition given by the European Union is that it is "the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism" (Commission of the European Communities 2005). A criticism of this definition is that it fails to acknowledge the nature of radicalisation as a process, the process by which an individual develops extremist ideologies and beliefs (WANA Institute 2016). This failure results in the lack of recognition for the causes and drivers of radicalisation, and therefore for a preventative approach to radicalisation. In addition, being radical or "extreme" does not by itself imply that a certain individual is a security threat to the community, or even that this is necessarily a negative attribute (Borum 2011). Radicalisation can therefore here be defined as the process that leads to developing extremist ideologies and beliefs, and there are different pathways, causes and drivers that lead to radicalisation (Borum 2011).

Consequently, a distinction also needs to be made between radicalisation and violent extremism. As radicalisation is a process, not every individual following this process will reach the point where they engage in violent activity, violent extremism or terrorism. In addition, violent extremism is not always connected to a strong belief in the ideology behind the violent action, but individuals can be drawn to the extremist group and activity for many different reasons (Borum 2011). Therefore, violent extremism is only the end-stage of the

process of radicalisation of an individual (Terre des Hommes 2018). To design a prevention strategy for radicalisation and violent extremism it is therefore important to understand the plurality of causes and drivers that lead individuals onto this path.

A very important part of the prevention of radicalisation is therefore to detect weak or very weak signals which could indicate that an individual could be on the path to becoming radicalized. In order to do this, especially when we consider radicalisation of children and young people, the collaboration of social actors such as schools, local authorities and social workers is fundamental as they have the most contact with these target groups. Many prevention programmes therefore focus on the establishment of partnerships with community representatives, investment in social and neighbourhood projects and mentoring schemes for youth "at risk". While these strategies are important and can yield important results, often they also run the risk of increasing stigmatization and exclusion of certain groups, and consequentially foster polarisation, pushing young people further on the radicalisation path (Bigo et al. 2014).

To avoid disproportionate and negative consequences through the implementation of these strategies, frameworks that promote a more integrated approach to prevention of radicalisation aimed at building a more resilient youth should be promoted (Terre des Hommes 2018). The drivers and causes that lead children and young people on the path to radicalisation have often been described as 'push' and 'pull' factors: push factors are largely understood as negative social, political economic and cultural drivers of individual decision-making, while pull factors are the positive characteristics or benefits offered by a group in exchange for participation (WANA Institute 2017). According to Nanes and Lau (2018), instead, push factors refer to structural issues within society whilst pull factors are psychological ones that render an individual more susceptible to radicalisation and violent extremism. In general, push factors are those that leave an individual dissatisfied and not trusting the mainstream system, and pull factors are those that make the extremist group seem like the better option.

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According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), push factors include the conditions conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges, including lack of socio-economic opportunities, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance and violation of human rights, prolonged and unresolved conflicts and radicalisation in prisons. Pull factors are instead the individual motivations and processes that play a role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremism: individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances and victimization, distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences, leadership and social networks (UNODC 2018). These factors should not be considered in isolation and are instead to be considered together with other factors as well as in the local, national and international context.

In particular, the existence of a grievance or perceived injustice by a sub-group of the population is often seen as an initial driver that encourages young people to find an alternative group which will recognize the injustice and give the individual an opportunity to fight back and right wrongs (Ferguson et al. 2008). Young people find in this alternative group a sense of identity, belonging and acceptance which they might not have in the broader society. This is in particular true for young people coming from minority groups, who feel alienated by a prevailing culture, or who may be feared or suspected because of their beliefs, religion, or where they live (Erwin 2016). Individuals within a minority group that feel marginalized and discriminated against, including through little or no political inclusions, limitations on freedom of expression and shrinking civic space, will at times be drawn towards radical ideologies (UNODC 2018).

Radicalisation is therefore in this case also a consequence of more diverse societies and a lack of policies to ensure integration and cohesion among these societies (UNODC 2018). In addition to pushing minorities towards radical ideologies, this situation can also result in a rise of far-right extremism on the part of the host communities, who feel an increasing threat to their way of life from the new communities (Steinmayr 2017). For these reasons, radicalisation towards both far-right or Islamic ideologies was recognized as an

increasing problem in Malta in the course of the ARMOUR research, as reflected across many European countries.

The factors described in the literature reflect the same type of causes and drivers that practitioners in Malta identified, including factors such as mental health, family situations, lack of social support etc. These factors leave young people looking for a better option, which they find in extremist ideologies, often through social media or the peers' network most close to them. For this reason, prevention strategies should attempt to tackle these issues and equip children and young people with instruments and skills that make them resilient to these ideologies and able to question them and create other opportunities for themselves.

Considering all the above, the ARMOUR project set out to first understand what the level of preparedness to violent extremism is in each of the 7 countries studied as part of the project, and then developed a methodology, through the experimental laboratories and the training programmes for practitioners aimed at assisting first-line practitioners to become better prepared. The next two sections will outline in further detail the findings of the ARMOUR research carried out through interviews and focus groups with first-line practitioners, and the methodology of the Experimental Laboratories, which was developed on the basis of the findings of the research.

Findings From the ARMOUR Interviews and Focus Groups: Malta

In the first phase of the ARMOUR project, qualitative research was carried out in 7 European countries⁹ in the form of expert interviews and focus groups, with the goal of understanding the extent to which first-line practitioners in those countries are knowledgeable about societal polarization and violent extremism and have access to the necessary resources¹⁰ to address such problems. What this research has emphasized first and foremost are the marked differences between countries inside the EU in terms of their level of preparedness in the area of radicalization, with countries such as Spain or the Netherlands being leaders in the field, while Romania and Malta are still lagging behind at the end of the pack.

⁹ Spain, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania, Austria and Greece.

¹⁰ Resources in this context can mean the funding to organize activities but also policies to guide them.

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In Malta, the qualitative research focused on teachers, social workers, law enforcement personnel, youth workers, psychologists and victim support services, as these were the professional categories identified to have most contact with children and teens. The findings were then incorporated into the design of the Experimental Laboratories.

An important finding coming out of the Malta research was that families and/or legal guardians of children were seen as the most frequent source of such beliefs. In other words, practitioners agreed that radicalisation and extremist ideas among youths living in Malta are often a consequence of beliefs and ideologies, both religious and political, coming from the adults in the family. Other push and pull factors mentioned included peer pressure, the socio-economic situation, the presence of subcultures in society, the lack of a stable upbringing, as well as the desire to belong to a group of people. Mental health as well as marginalization, isolation and the lack of a sense of identity were also perceived as contributing factors to the process of radicalisation.

Secondly, most practitioners agreed that the predominant extremist ideology encountered in Malta is the far-right type, with Islamic radicalization potentially becoming more important in the future. Moreover, participants mentioned the murder of a black immigrant in Malta as an example of violent far-right extremism. The use of social media in the country, especially Facebook, was also indicated as a source of false information that could lead young people towards radical and biased ideas, especially of the far-right type.

In what concerns their knowledge of the subject and the resources they have available, all participants taking part in the research mentioned a lack of training and/or knowledge on the topic of radicalisation. Most have acknowledged lacking the know-how to recognize early signals of radicalization and/or intervening in such cases. This is especially true when working with people of different backgrounds and cultures, as first-line practitioners in Malta are predominantly Maltese and felt they would not be able to reach out and gain trust from youth from different cultures and ideologies and speaking different languages. An important issue raised by many

different practitioners was the lack of interpreters who can aid them in their activities.

Another key finding was the absence of instruments aimed at preventing and countering societal polarization and radicalization. One example provided was the absence of policies aimed at identifying and responding to such cases, similar to the one in place for drug addiction prevention. The practitioners believed that in cases where signs of radicalisation are identified as a concern, a system should be put into place enabling a broad range of stakeholders to follow up with the child or young person in question and provide counselling. The school should be able to provide counselling with the help of educational counsellors, and if necessary it can also involve the parents. Furthermore, social work services and youth work services can refer the child to extra-curricular activities tailored to her/his interests as a means of channelling their energy into positive activities.

However, practitioners also underlined the difficulty posed by the need for parental consent. If one accepts that the adults in the family are more often than not the source of the extreme ideas embraced by children and teens it becomes clear that more often than not they would not be open to assisting the school in these mediating efforts. Therefore, all measures are on a voluntary basis and the only way to enforce them without the consent and collaboration of the parents is through a probation order by a judge, which can only be requested by the police in the case of violent actions.

Another challenge identified by Maltese practitioners is the absence of formalized inter- and intra-agency cooperation in this area. While at a theoretical level different types of practitioners can request assistance from colleagues based in other governmental agencies/public institutions, this is often left at the discretion of the individual practitioner and his/her willingness to go the extra mile. The absence of a clear model of cooperation (e.g. the joint task forces in place in the UK as part of the Channel project) makes it difficult for institutions to ask and receive the support they require from practitioners. For example, schools can also ask for the support of social work services when deemed necessary; however, both

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categories emphasized that the collaboration between them is difficult due to lack of resources but also lack of information, bureaucratic processes and efficient follow-ups.

There was therefore agreement among participants that there is a need to improve this collaboration system at national level in a such a way as to ensure that any child or teen at risk is monitored and assisted by the relevant practitioners in every aspect of his/her life, to avoid letting him/her fall between the cracks.

One of the main recommendations made by practitioners was the introduction of training and awareness-raising activities on the topic of radicalization and polarization, as it is their belief that there is not sufficient knowledge of the subject and the seriousness of the situation is significantly underestimated. Additionally, improved training would provide practitioners with tools and strategies to use with children and young people to help them become more resilient to radicalisation. Practitioners believe that more education around tolerance and acceptance at a young age would create a more cohesive society and avoid polarisation and consequentially radicalisation. Education should also focus more on developing the children's and young people's own identity and abilities, as well as their self-esteem, confidence and ability to cope with adversity.

While schools have been identified as a suitable environment for such positive interventions, practitioners have emphasized that these activities should not only be reduced to schools but instead they should be organized in such settings as would make the target audience most comfortable. Moreover, Maltese practitioners highlighted the need to use a whole-school and whole-community approach to prevent the possibility of stigma and further polarisation by singling out children at risk.

Experimental Laboratories: The ARMOUR Methodology

The belief behind the design of the Experimental Laboratories is that by strengthening the individuals' identity, the exercises

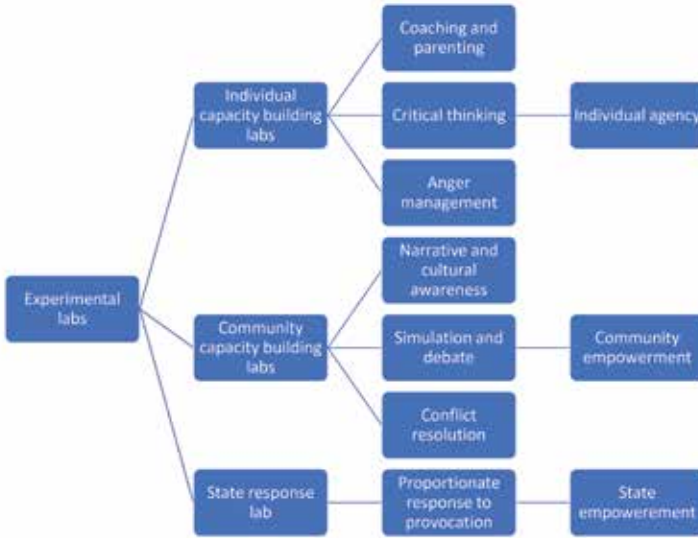
included in the laboratories will build resilience and reject radicalisation and violent extremism. This is a relatively novel idea as previously many of the prevention programmes were aimed at later stages in the process of radicalization when an individual had already embarked on this path. By comparison, ARMOUR works with all children and teens – not only those displaying signs of radicalization, as it believes that early intervention is key to achieving successful positive emotional development. Moreover, ARMOUR seeks to give a voice to the moderate – and it does so by ensuring they have the skills to challenge and deconstruct radical and polarizing ideas which they might encounter from their peers or adult family members.

The concept of resilience is employed in many different fields and it is therefore difficult to find a commonly agreed-on definition. It can generally be defined in two ways: the ability, of a community or of an individual, to return to a state of equilibrium following some form of stress or adversity, but also the ability to transform and evolve in the face of adversity (Davoudi 2012). In the context of policies for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism and the ARMOUR project, the type of resilience we are talking about is the second one, a resilience that prevents a process of radicalisation.

Consequently, the interventions suggested (e.g. Experimental Laboratories) promote the development of certain skills and attributes in young people that render them more resilient: in some cases, these focus on training programmes and activities which will develop skills such as critical thinking, whereas in other contexts resilience is described as a consequence of general educational approaches, often through promotion of democratic values and practices (Stephens and Sieckenlick 2020). Additionally, while many programmes focus on resilience at the individual level, some also tackle resilience at the community level as well as the societal level. This approach is reflected in the ARMOUR project, which focuses on different types of laboratories at three different levels (Figure 1): individual capacity building laboratories aimed at developing individual agency; community capacity building laboratories focusing on community empowerment; and state response laboratories focusing on state empowerment.

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Figure 1: Model of the Experimental Laboratories Programme



The laboratories are based on the cognitive-behavioural instructional model and the learning-by-doing model, and propose techniques and strategies that can easily be adapted to teach young people in responding to dysfunctional situations that might trigger a radicalisation path (ARMOUR 2019c). Feedback will be collected during these laboratories and the model will be revised accordingly, and then distributed and promoted more broadly through both offline and online Train the Trainers programme (ToT). The objectives of this approach are to bring about behaviour change and dissuade vulnerable groups from embracing radical ideologies and violent extremism, to increase civic engagement and participate actively in democratic processes, to halt radicalisation processes and to enhance resilience and critical thinking.¹¹

The individual capacity building laboratories focus on the skills that are more commonly targeted in preventative actions and policies focusing on building resilience, including particularly the capacity to think critically, which includes the ability of verifying facts and opinions that young people are presented with (UNESCO 2017). Within the project, critical thinking is

¹¹ ARMOUR Grant Agreement – Action Description p. 95.

described as the ability to pursue “truth” over our own biases, assess our own thinking fairly and abandon mistaken reasoning for new and more valid ways of thinking (ARMOUR 2019d). This skill therefore empowers young people to think independently and make well-informed decisions, gaining confidence and the ability to learn from their mistakes. Critical thinking should be developed alongside anger management, which, considering that anger is one of the most cited push factors towards radicalisation, needs to be addressed to allow children and young people to learn how to manage it and how to handle conflictual situations, solve problems and control impulses independently and in non-conflicting ways (Stout 2002; ARMOUR 2019e). Both of these skills were also mentioned by first-line practitioners in the interviews and focus groups, who pointed out their importance and the little attention they are often given in the Maltese education system.

The importance of leaders acting as teachers and coaches is another key component of this process as highlighted by the third laboratory aimed at developing individual agency, focusing on coaching and parenting. The exercises carried out in this laboratory allow first-line practitioners to experiment with coaching and parenting strategies that allow them to understand triggers, behaviour, decisions and reactions, and are at the same time useful for children and young people to develop mechanisms and strategies encouraging control of one’s own emotions, while working on empathy, teamwork skills and learning to avoid stereotypes and discrimination (ARMOUR 2019f).

The second part of the laboratories aims at putting these skills into practice within the community around the individual, and to work together to build community resilience. To this end, the narrative and cultural awareness laboratory attempts to tackle the social construction of collective and individual identities through narratives, focusing on spotting dysfunctional or toxic narratives and promoting positive narratives and self-expression and self-affirmation (ARMOUR 2019g). Additionally, the conflict resolution and debate and simulation laboratories work together in providing children and young people with tools to express their positive narratives and self-expression and co-operate with peers to resolve problems and conflicts in

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a positive manner while developing their communication skills and teamwork (ARMOUR 2019h; ARMOUR 2019i).

Through these laboratories, the project focuses on community agency and on encouraging children and young people to engage in activities with peers which would develop their communication skills. Literature on community resilience emphasizes the importance of neighbourhood networks and social relationships in developing these skills, which can be encouraged both in classrooms and through extra-curricular activities such as team sports, theatre and other (Johns et al. 2014). This is also reflected in the ARMOUR findings from the interviews and focus groups, where all practitioners suggested these types of activities as something that should be encouraged for children and young people at risk of marginalization and isolation, and consequentially polarisation and radicalisation (ARMOUR 2019b).

The last laboratory and objective of the Experimental Laboratories focuses on the state response to radicalisation. It was often highlighted in the interviews and focus group findings that the key to an effective prevention policy for radicalisation is to build an effective prevention system with the collaboration of all the different stakeholders and practitioners (ARMOUR 2019b). For this reason, this laboratory is aimed at a slightly different audience which includes policy makers, and focuses on designing and implementing proportionate measures to early radicalisation in young individuals by discussing with the participants specific scenarios and case studies (ARMOUR 2019i).

The strength of the ARMOUR model of experimental laboratories is that it works on the three different levels together, aiming at building each one of them. As Stephens and Sieckelinc (2020) argue, the ability to think critically and recognize negative narratives which is often associated with resilience, although necessary, is not sufficient as it only addresses part of the narratives and ideas which may create an openness to violence. By developing these skills alongside those that encourage community resilience as well as state response, the ARMOUR project tackles all causes of

radicalisation, including trust in institutions and ability to work alongside peers. These skills are at the basis of the work of the first-line practitioners in any situation, which makes them the perfect stakeholders to address children and young people at risk.

Conclusion

The activities of the ARMOUR project aim to build a model of prevention for radicalization in children and young people which can be applied in many different contexts, including the Maltese one. The Experimental Laboratories provide first-line practitioners working in all institutions, including schools, social work services, youth work settings and others, the strategies and methodologies to teach children and young people skills which would make them resilient to extreme ideologies. In addition, these laboratories also develop skills that encourage communication and exchange across different groups and therefore decrease the distance between them, and therefore polarization in schools and Maltese societies as a whole.

The ARMOUR tools, but also other similar ones, are important practices to encourage multiculturalism and integration of different cultures in schools in particular and more broadly within societies. One of the problems that teachers in particular identified is the lack of resources and time to be able to tackle radicalisation and polarisation while carrying out the school curricula. The advantage of such instruments is that they can be used alongside the normal workload, as they are flexible enough to be incorporated in standard lessons and do not require extensive resources.

The development of these skills, as identified by first-line practitioners, is, however, not enough on their own and it needs to be paired with the development of a prevention system across institutions, which would allow practitioners to identify early signs of radicalization and work together to prevent them from escalating. This system should therefore include awareness-raising activities on the topics of radicalization for practitioners, as well as for young people and parents, adapted to different needs. In addition, more collaboration

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across institutions and possibly a referral for cases at risk should be implemented, while paying attention to avoiding the risk of stigmatization of young people at risk.

The level to which this is necessary across different countries varies, though in the case of Malta our findings seem to indicate that there is very little in place at the moment and therefore immediate efforts in this field are required.

As seen in the case of Malta, if polarisation and radicalisation are not tackled early enough the situation will worsen and escalate the divisions and tensions across different societal groups. What this paper is trying to showcase is the need to put into practice these prevention instruments which are already available at an early stage, even if the circumstances are not perfect and the resources not extensive, by incorporating them into the day-to-day activities and programs already being implemented by first-line practitioners. This, however, requires an acknowledgement from institutions that polarisation and radicalisation are problems in Malta, and a commitment to reform existing policy and build a system which focuses on early prevention. These policies should work on a whole government approach, where all practitioners working with children and young people are trained and made aware of the topic. Schools and teachers should play a key role in the prevention of polarisation and radicalisation as they are closest to the children and young people, but they should not be left on their own and overburdened with this task but assisted by other key stakeholders.

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