
Participatory Theatre for Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education - Reflections on Prospects and Preconditions

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Abstract

As the search for new ways of preventing violent extremism through education (PVE-E) continues, the question arises as to what the creative arts can offer. This paper argues that Forum Theatre inspired by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, is a useful strengths-based approach to PVE-E. By allowing students to intervene and change the plot in a re-run of a play on radicalisation, Forum Theatre supports students in understanding the complexity of radicalisation and reflecting on protective factors as well as intervention possibilities. It offers opportunities to take on different perspectives and experiment with, question and explore the consequences of behavioural decisions in certain contexts. However, there are some conditions for Forum Theatre to fully exploit its potential for PVE-E. Among others, the creative intervention requires a safe environment where students' learning is not impaired by self-censorship. It should also be noted that while Forum Theatre can empower students to take preventative action themselves, its sole purpose should not be to turn students into prevention actors. Adequate training for teachers and external artistic professionals as well as preparation and follow-up for students are also indispensable. Now, it is time to expand the evidence base for such a participatory education method to assess whether it lives up to the theoretical expectations and whether such conditions are met in practice.

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Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education

Universal prevention of violent extremism, which is directed at the general population and is intended to make people resilient to extremist narratives, often takes place in the educational context. In Germany, for example, 94% of universal prevention measures in 2020 were found in schools (Freiheit et al., 2021, p. 66). Young people are considered the primary target group for extremist recruitment attempts, as adolescence marks a 'period of intense psychosocial development characterised by a search for ontological security and consolidation of

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ideological identity' (Aly et al., 2014, p. 373). While this state could be described as an increased risk of radicalisation to violent extremism, it can also be seen as a stage in life in which certain needs, such as relatedness, that extremist groups can fulfil are particularly prominent (Marsden & Lee, 2022; Paalgard Munden et al., 2023; cf. Ward & Brown, 2004; Ward & Marshall, 2004). According to a strength-based approach, 'people seek out or deepen their engagement in extremist spaces not solely because of the cumulative effect of risk factors, but instead in an effort to deploy certain strengths in the pursuit of meaningful lives, albeit in contexts and ways that violate wider societal norms' (Marsden & Lee, 2022, p. 10).

As 'central, long-term growing-up contexts (...) providing resources, structures, and practices and values conducive to positive development' (Benjamin et al., 2021, p. 205), schools are particularly well suited as places to develop skills that support adolescents in fulfilling their needs outside extremist milieus and in a legal and normative way (Sjøen & Jore, 2019, p. 269). School is a socialisation space in which numerous protective factors can be fostered, for example a good social environment that fulfils needs for relatedness or knowledge. However, school is also a setting where cognitive skills can be promoted that are considered incompatible with the black-and-white thinking of extremist ideologies, for example, tolerance of ambiguity or value complexity. Such skills have a reinforcing effect on protective factors and can increase resilience to extremist narratives (Davies, 2018, p. 24; Liht & Savage, 2013). For any measures in the school context that have direct or indirect preventive effects, the acronym PVE-E, preventing violent extremism in education, has been established.

In addition to measures that are generally understood as political education, whose primary goal is to enable individuals to participate in a liberal democratic society and which therefore have indirect preventive effects (Stephens et al., 2021, p. 348; Behr et al., 2021, pp. 89-91), there are also frequent measures in schools that address radicalisation towards violent extremism directly. The most frequently chosen format of PVE-E to date is the in-class and teacher-moderated discussion on radicalisation and violent extremism, which is often defined by its incompatibility with supposed societal values (Christodoulou, 2020, p. 30). In the UK, for example, it is common for students to talk about values such as 'diversity' and 'tolerance' and to identify these as diametrically opposed to extremism, as this also reflects the legislator's understanding of extremism (Home Office, 2011, p. 107). In recent years,

however, there has been a growing interest in new didactics, especially those that are more ‘enjoyable learning experiences for adolescents’ (Aly et al., 2014, pp. 379-382; Wallner, 2020, pp. 44-45). Theatre education is one such type of measure (e.g. Terhaag, 2020). This article discusses the added value of a participatory form of theatre education, Forum Theatre, for PVE-E and certain conditions that need to be in place to fully exploit its potential and avoid adverse consequences.

Augusto Boal and Theatre Education

The use of theatre education for the purpose of PVE-E has been observed both in the UK (Piasecka, 2019, p. 715) and in Germany, for example. However, this type of method still accounts for a very small percentage of universal prevention overall. In Germany, only 2% of prevention measures were classified as theatre in 2020 (Freiheit et al., 2021, p. 66). Theatre education can either be participatory or non-participatory. Theatre in Education (TiE) is often the umbrella term for the mere transfer of knowledge using theatre education methods (Piasecka, 2019, p. 719). Students usually only attend a play as a passive audience and the topic is usually prepared and followed up in class. Participatory theatre methods are distinct from this. Here, students take part in the play in various ways, for example by engaging in dialogue with the actors or, as in the case of Forum Theatre, having the opportunity to alter scenes in a re-run of the play and sometimes participate themselves (cf. OddArts, n.d.).

The roots of such participatory formats lie in progressive educational movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Jackson, 1993, p.19). The ideas of the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, whose ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ refers to critical pedagogy and recognises the emancipatory possibilities of participatory didactics, had a particular influence on participatory theatre methods. Boal’s method underlies an understanding of theatricality as human property. Accordingly, theatre is an intrinsic quality of human beings, as their ability to self-observe enables humans to have a three-dimensional subjectivity: ‘The Observing-I, the I-in-situ, and the not-I, that is, the other’ (Boal, 1995, pp. 13-14). For Boal, the series of theatre methods he called ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ will ‘safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation, by turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions’ (ibid., pp.

14-15). Moreover, any aesthetic space, meaning the context in which theatricality is practised, has ‘properties which stimulate knowledge and discovery’ and thus encourage a ‘process of learning by experience’ (ibid., p. 20). Instead of being spectators of a play in which actors and the audience constitute separate groups, the methods of the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ turn people into ‘spect-actors’. They thus experience a transformation from passivity into activity by using their three-dimensional subjectivity, the observing-I, the I-in-situ, and the not-I, to become shapers of their own learning experience (Boal, 1979, p. 122). Taking on the role of the protagonist, learners can experiment with possibilities for change and thus train themselves ‘for real action’ (ibid.). Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ is primarily intended to enable those affected to uncover systemic problems and develop possible solutions by trying out perspectives and possible courses of action on stage.

Two techniques exemplify this transformation process from spectator to actor to varying degrees. While Forum Theatre merely encourages an audience members’ intervention, Invisible Theatre leaves no choice of participation. In Forum Theatre, trained actors first present a play to an audience. The audience is then invited to reflect on the events and question individual actions. Subsequently, the play is re-run, and audience members are encouraged to ‘intervene decisively in the dramatic action and change it’ at any time (Boal, 1979, p. 126). The original actors play along with each intervention and thus let the consequences of different actions become visible. Hence, the theoretical added value of Forum Theatre is that learners gain an awareness of the ‘complexities and contradictions’ (Vine, 1993, p. 121) of social interactions and can explore and experiment with alternative courses of action by voluntarily assuming a protagonists’ role. This opens up a rehearsal space for reality (Wrentschur, 2014, pp. 5–6), as various possibilities for action are made visible, and the spect-actors thereby become aware of the diversity of their options for action in similar real-life situations. Invisible Theatre takes the blurring of boundaries between spectator and actor even further. Actors stage a situation in an environment not normally associated with theatre and provoke onlookers, who do not know that they are thus part of a play, to get involved. Participants consider the unfolding situation, such as an argument in which they feel compelled to intervene, to be real. The timing of the resolution is a matter of discretion for the organisers, and sometimes there is no debriefing at all. Thus, Invisible Theatre entirely revokes the separation between actor and spectator and induces a learning

process through the illusion of a real-life experience that no one can escape being a part of (Boal & Jackson, 2021; Riemen, 2022). Since Invisible Theatre has so far only rarely been used for PVE-E (Riemen, 2022), this paper continues with discussing the added value of and conditions for using Forum Theatre for PVE-E.

Forum Theatre for PVE-E

Forum theatre has already been used for the purpose of PVE-E in several countries, including the UK (OddArts, n.d.), Germany (Thevo, 2021) and France (Jamaity, 2019). In some cases, Forum Theatre or similar participatory theatre methods take place beyond the school context and are located at the interface between universal and selective prevention, for example when they are used in prison contexts (cf. MIND prevention, n.d.). However, in most cases, theatre education measures that are based on Boal's ideas constitute universal prevention and are provided by external organisations that are invited or referred to schools. The costs are either borne by the schools themselves or by external sponsors, who can sometimes also be government actors (Wegel, 2019, p. 388). In practice, Forum Theatre thus slightly diverges from Boal's original ideas: Instead of those affected by systemic oppression, professional actors first perform a play on radicalisation which is then followed by a joint reflection on the play and a re-run. The students are invited to interrupt the play in order to identify points where alternative actions or alternative contextual conditions are believed to have a positive influence on the radicalisation process (cf. OddArts, n.d.; Boal, 1979, p. 126).

Students are thus trained to recognise a radicalisation and sensitised to the complexity and multi-causality of that process. The radicalising person is humanised, portrayed as a person with needs, possibly also a young person with adolescent needs, who in the course of the play resorts to illegal and non-normative methods to meet these needs by turning to extremist groups because of personal and contextual factors. One example are needs for relatedness and safety that make a lonely protagonist who is bullied at school susceptible to offers of contact from extremists who may offer friendship and protection (cf. Paalgard Munden et al., 2023). Several factors and their interlinking can be recognised by the pupils as barriers to the normative fulfilment of such needs, for example the behaviour of classmates or a lack of support structures in the school context (cf. Mallion et al., 2020). In the British play

Tapestry, the audience is invited to regularly question the radicalising person's actions during the play. Based on post-performance interviews and surveys, Winston and Strand (2013, p. 63) summarise that this allowed the audience to reflect on multiple paths to violent extremism in a safe space and thus approach the difficult and sometimes controversial topic of radicalisation in a playful way. Similarly, the play *Not in My Name* invites the audience to enter into conversation with the person they know will decide to carry out a terrorist attack during an interactive part. Reflecting on the play's implementation, its author Bartlett (2011, p. 189) notes that it has provided a 'significant opportunity to stimulate meaningful discussion' on such challenging and prejudiced topic as radicalisation and highlights as a positive outcome that it would have created a deeper understanding of the complexity of the motivations behind violent extremism and terrorism (ibid., cf. Piasecka, 2019, p. 730).

During the re-run of a Forum Theatre play, students have the opportunity to experiment with alternative conditions constantly asking 'what if?'. They intervene in a scene and change it as they deem necessary in order to exert a positive influence on the protagonist, to bring him back to a normative way of fulfilling needs. The actors react accordingly by showing alternative courses of action. As a result, the radicalising person emerges not only as someone with needs, but also as someone whose development must be viewed in the context of structural conditions and the influence of other people. Systemic failures are considered as possible contributing factors to radicalisation as are personal decisions. The identity of the radicalising person can be perceived as 'subjunctivised, unfixed and a dance of possibilities rather than a ritual of destiny' (Winston & Strand, 2013, p. 74) and their decisions as context-dependent.

The opportunity to intervene also gives students the chance to perceive the context in which decisions are made from multiple perspectives. When the spectator becomes a spect-actor, they do not necessarily have to take on the role of the protagonist, but can also consciously assume other people's positions. If this presentation of several perspectives on a situation is combined with the previous demonstration of the complexity and multi-layered nature of radicalisation, then not only does the protagonist become multi-dimensional, but all bystanders also become people with agency and needs. Moreover, the viewer may turn their mind not only to alternative courses of action and structural contextual factors, but also to the possibilities of bystanders: What possibilities might there be to exert an influence on the

protagonist (Hammer, 2021)? Students may also test out how one could behave as a friend or relative of the radicalising person, for example, in order to wield a positive influence and intervene in a radicalisation process.

Forum Theatre based on the ideas of Augusto Boal therefore seems promising for PVE-E and can be seen as an example of ‘experiential, creative, and fun cultural activities as means of learning’ (Wallner, 2020, p. 44). Forum Theatre can have an inoculative effect (cf. Braddock, 2022), as students are also confronted with extremist propaganda and learn how extremist recruitment attempts work before dismantling them after the play and illuminating the complexity of radicalisation processes. They then have the opportunity to test for themselves which contextual conditions need to change or which interventions are useful so that the protagonist fulfils his needs beyond extremist milieus and in pro-social and normative ways. However, there are a few preconditions that need to be considered when implementing this participatory method, without which these effects are compromised.

Reflecting on the Limits of Forum Theatre for PVE-E

A complex picture of radicalisation can only emerge if this is carefully planned in the project design and stereotypical depictions of linear radicalisation processes and a pathologisation of radicalising individuals are problematised and consciously avoided. It can be useful to work closely with prevention practitioners and academics during the design phase of the play or even to draw on first-hand accounts from former extremists. When theatre education is used for PVE-E in Germany, the depiction of radicalisation processes is often based on real-life cases. Here, autobiographies, interviews with former extremists or in one case, according to Freiheit et al. (2021, p. 95), police interrogation transcripts are used.

Apart from that, however, the depiction of radicalisation to violent extremism remains a political act and, despite the portrayal of this as a complex process, it will remain controversial whether or not a play depicts the ‘right’ push and pull factors for radicalisation. Especially when it comes to radicalisation to religiously based extremism, there is a risk of problematising religious and cultural practices and drawing on racist stereotypes, thus fuelling anger instead of educating (Hughes, 2011). This should be thoroughly reflected in the conception of these theatre plays. Trainings for theatre professionals as well as teachers

(Freiheit et al., 2021, p. 111) could also help to avoid perpetuating structural prejudices and to prepare adequately for pupils' reactions. This is sensible in any case, as dealing with the topic of radicalisation can also be emotionally upsetting while teachers need to have the know-how to deal with students' needs and questions afterwards (Wallner, 2020, p. 7). The portrayal of adolescent problems, which in combination with other factors may lead to radicalisation, can also trigger students to recall their own memories, such as experiences of discrimination or bullying. However, Forum Theatre thus also presents an opportunity to uncover and jointly discuss such experiences.

In addition to the question of what is shown, there is also the question of why something is shown. What is the purpose of Forum Theatre? Communicating how complex and multifactorial radicalisation is and that the radicalising person is also searching for fulfilment of needs has a direct preventative effect on the audience in the best-case scenario: Alternative courses of action are discussed or tried out, extremist recruitment attempts are identified as such and resilience against them is strengthened. Besides this, Forum Theatre also offers an opportunity to highlight possibilities for intervention. When students during the play *Not in My Name* are invited to 'offer constructive advice' (Bartlett, 2011, p. 189), there 'in-situ-I' assumes the role of an advisor to a radicalising individual. On the one hand, imparting such competences can be emancipating: Young people become empowered and learn which protective factors against radicalisation they can work towards. This can range from an understanding that one should respect the needs of others and maintain diverse friend networks (cf. Kaczokowski et al., 2022) to very specific ideas on how to behave towards a family member or a friend who is radicalising, for example. After all, friends and relatives are believed to have a particular influence on radicalising individuals, partly due to their intimacy and trust (Williams, Horgan, and Evans, 2016; El-Amraoui & Ducol, 2019).

On the other hand, there is also the danger of a 'potential (...) appropriation of young people as political agents' (Bartlett, 2011, p.176). It becomes highly problematic when theatre educational methods are solely seen as an instrument to turn young people into potential intervention actors. On the one hand, this may fuel expectations that can be very dangerous for students: They could feel pressurised to attempt a quite dangerous intervention when the need arises and feel responsible if it is not fruitful. Despite the opportunity to demonstrate intervention options, Forum Theatre should not fall prey to this logic, but rather problematise

it and, as with radicalisation, convey that intervention in a radicalisation process is highly complex and context-dependent. Reference should also be made to counselling services that can offer support for friends and relatives when they make the decision to attempt an intervention (Koehler, 2013; Koehler & Ehrt, 2018).

Especially because the subject matter can be emotionally challenging, political and because Forum Theatre is intended to encourage students to try out positions and literally ‘play’ with possible courses of action, thus theatre education method necessitates a safe and trusted environment. If students fear disadvantages as a result of their statements or actions, this can have a negative impact on their willingness to take part in participatory parts or discussions and thus reduce their learning outcomes. Boal also recognised that a possible ‘cop in the head’ risks self-censorship. Such a ‘fear or being labelled, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of what is not understood’ (Bartlett, 2011, p. 176; cf. O’Donnell, 2020) can thus deprive theatre education measures of their added value for PVE-E by preventing an authentic and meaningful learning experience. This danger is particularly present when theatre education measures receive state funding, for example from the controversial British prevention programme ‘Prevent’. Due to the Prevent Duty, which obliges teachers to report suspicious behaviour, students could particularly engage in self-censorship and mistrust teachers and artistic professionals. State funding hence results in considerable ‘ethical and artistic challenges (...)’ (Winston and Strand, 2013, p. 63).

However, a safe environment does not mean that teachers need to stay absent in the discussions. In the case of controversial topics, where contributions to the discussion can be emotionally upsetting, completely ‘nondirective’ teaching can be irresponsible. Ultimately, conflicts are likely to arise when interpreting a scene and teachers should be prepared to facilitate respectful discussion and prevent any grievances from forming. Following Gregory (2014, p. 637), teachers could use a ‘procedurally directive approach’ so that they support the learners by asking critical questions and offering numerous stimuli without prescribing an interpretation from the outset. Such a role not only accounts for Wallner’s (2020, p. 33) remark that non-prescriptive PVE-E interventions have a high chance of ‘generating positive change’ but also corresponds with Boal’s critical pedagogy. For example, in Forum Theatre, the project leader is understood as a facilitator of a ‘journey of exploration’ who continuously but carefully challenges learners (Vine, 1993, p. 117).

This is linked to the need for good preparation and follow-up of Forum Theatre and related participatory theatre education. However, this is often not the case. Wegel (2019, p. 395) conducted a quantitative online survey of students who had not engaged in Forum Theatre but in a play on the subject of radicalisation and found that only 31% had discussed the play with their teacher afterwards and only 27% had been prepared by teachers. She then calculated a correlation which shows that ‘pupils only talked about the play with their parents afterwards if the play was also followed up in class (.176**) or if topics such as radicalisation, equality and gender roles were generally discussed regularly in class (**.198)’ (ibid.). Lasting effects are difficult to measure, yet for the reasons mentioned above, such as the controversial nature of what is shown and the possible upsetting effects, it seems more than sensible to make preparation and follow-up of theatre education measures mandatory. In the case of the play examined by Wegel, this is even a condition for funding the project. According to Freiheit et al. (2021, p. 97), a ‘long-term effect can only be expected if [theatre educational methods] are didactically embedded in a long-term school prevention strategy, or at least in a pedagogical examination of (...) extremism in the classroom’.

Measuring Effectiveness

The theoretical advantages of Forum Theatre for PVE-E are obvious, but if the conditions just discussed are not met, they may not materialise or counterproductive effects may arise. For this reason, this paper ends with highlighting the central role of evaluation. Only by systematically reviewing the effectiveness of theatre education measures is it ultimately possible to assess whether they represent added value for universal prevention of violent extremism. In reality, however, the effectiveness of such theatre education measures is difficult to measure empirically, which is also reflected in the limited empirical evidence and number of studies on these methods in PVE-E. Measuring the effectiveness of measures to prevent extremism and, above all, universal prevention is fundamentally a ‘thorny issue’ (Christodoulou, 2020, p. 26; cf. Hassan et al., 2021; Hirschi & Widmer, 2012), because either the outcome to be measured is a ‘non-event’, such as ‘non-radicalisation’, or a vague proxy for it, such as the above-mentioned competences ‘increased tolerance of ambiguity’ or ‘increased value complexity’, which are said to have a protective effect against radicalisation.

Experimental methods in which the effect on those who have taken part in the Forum Theatre is compared with that of a control group would be particularly suitable for measuring effectiveness. If it is considered unethical to withhold such a measure from a control group, quasi-experimental evaluation designs (cf. Horgan & Braddock, 2010) are a possible alternative, for example pre- and post-intervention surveys. However, this requires a desired outcome to be defined and indicators for this to be operationalised. The individuality of the students and the possible influence of numerous intervening variables must also be considered when interpreting the results of such surveys. Another complicating factor is that it may be possible to measure immediate effects in this way, although one may be particularly interested in long-term effects. Mixed-method designs prove to be useful in view of these challenges. One example is the evaluation of universal and selective preventive theatre education interventions in prisons: Here, effectiveness was measured using a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire, but interviews were also conducted with workshop participants, in some cases long after the intervention. In addition, people who were involved in the workshops or prison staff were also interviewed (Stemmler et al., 2022) for a more contextual understanding of the workings of the intervention.

Evaluating theatre pedagogical measures is therefore challenging, but nevertheless possible. Evaluations of such measures need to be expanded because, depending on the evaluation design, they will not only provide information about the effectiveness of such measures, but also provide insights into working mechanisms and possible side effects of these didactics. In theory and on the basis of initial empirical findings, albeit few evaluations, theatre education methods, and especially Forum Theatre, appear to be promising and innovative measures that enrich strengths-based approaches in the universal prevention of violent extremism. Unlike conventional approaches, such as teacher-led classroom discussions, it offers methods that are experimental and creative and can integrate such difficult topics like radicalisation and violent extremism into the school setting while remaining suitable to adolescents' learning needs and interests (Wallner, 2020, pp. 44-45). The next step is to further expand empirical research and use evaluations to examine the extent to which Forum Theatre can be meaningfully implemented in practice.

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