# In between the need and the uncertainty: Estonian teachers' ambiguities, experiences and reflections in tackling extremism in the classroom

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ABSTRACT: Schools are one of the primary settings for fostering skills to support students in understanding the causes, motivations and outcomes of extremism (Vallinkoski *et al.* 2021). This article presents the results of a pilot study focusing on Estonian educators' experiences with discussing and tackling extremism in the classroom. The questionnaire of the study is created based on a similar study conducted in Finland by Vallinkoski, Koirikivi and Malkki (2021), with the permission of the main author and adaptions for the Estonian context. Less than half of the teachers mentioned instances where they had met students supporting or following an extremist ideology. Most of the latter were not fully certain about how to classify the cases they had in mind. The examples that were mentioned most often were right-wing extremism, conspiracy theories, Islamism, coronavirus, Nazism and Communism. Estonian teachers are enthusiastic about the positive role of education in the prevention of extremism. However, they struggle with the 'ambiguity' of extremism, partly due to the Estonian system of education that does not include a nation-wide program for prevention of extremism or counter-radicalisation in education. Correspondingly, teachers feel quite uncertain about what their exact *duty*, *role* and *mandate* is as far as extremism is concerned.

KEYWORDS: extremism, teaching, teachers' beliefs, sensitive issues, self-censorship, radicalisation, preventing radicalisation, countering radicalisation, Estonia

**INTRODUCTION**

Tackling extremism in the classroom involves ambiguities, uncertainties, and challenges related to what is expected of teachers and education and how teachers need to act. The 'ambiguities' of extremism can be approached from two perspectives—ambiguities that result from the way how extremism is defined and ambiguities related to the way how extremism is tackled in the classroom.

*Ambiguity regarding definitions*

For starters, extremism is not a value neutral term (Arthur 2015: 314), which means that its definition and implementation has ideological implications. This is probably the main reason why the term lacks a commonly accepted definition. No clear (universally accepted or objective) definitions exist for extremism (Arthur 2015: 313), terrorism and radicalisation (Onursal & Kirckpatrick 2021), or countering violent extremism (Gielen 2019: 1152).

Generally, there are three approaches in defining extremism:

1) Extremism as *violence*. The focus is on the use of political violence. Groups and movements relying on political violence typically also have an ideological profile, but no major ideology (e.g. anarchism, nationalism, liberalism) is neither extremist nor immune to it. The focus is not on the type of ideological content but on the explicit legitimisation of the use of violence by an ideology in a given political context.

Gary Ackerman and Michael Burnham define 'violent adversarial ideology' as follows: "[A]n ideology that enunciates specific grievances, delimits enemies, and legitimates violence against those enemies" (Ackerman & Burnham 2021: 1169). If the core indicator of extremism is violence, then a person who has adopted an extreme position without being involved in "violent behaviour in support of the position adopted" (Arthur 2015: 313) is not an extremist. But others, who have been involved in violent extremism without having an in-depth understanding of the radical ideology (Malkki 2020: 16), are classified as extremists.

2) Extremism as a 'structure of *thinking*' (Davies 2021: 103) and 'the denial of other realities' (Davies 2008: 612). The question is not about the use of violence or the content of the views. Extremism relies on the belief that "there is one right answer, truth or path, and that there are no alternatives" (Davies 2009: 192). Its drivers are *absolutism* (single truths, simple dualisms, black and white certainties) and "the search for *perfection*, *utopia* or *purity*" (Davies 2009: 190).

In this view, the teacher recognises extremist thinking in students by the 'low tolerance of ambiguity' (Vergani *et al.* 2020: 94) and controversies (or of conflicting ideas) (Bonnell *et al.* 2010: 82; Andersson 2016), "the inability or unwillingness to see different sides of an argument, to be able to hold different values at the same time" (Davies 2021: 103).

Counter-radicalisation pedagogy aims "to teach people to be at comfort with ambiguity" (Davies 2009: 190), be "more at ease with ambiguity and conflicting ideas" (Bonnell *et al.* 2020: 82), and be flexible in thinking (Davies 2008: 620). The teacher does not instil a 'correct' ideology in students but aims to "increase the complexity of thinking in students" (Davies 2021: 103). Teaching should involve and enhance 'integrative complexity' and value pluralism (Davies 2018: 13; Davies 2021: 103). Controversial issues pedagogy is a corresponding approach in preventing and tackling extremism in the classroom (Jerome & Elwick 2020).

3) Extremism as the opposite of (mainstream) *social values*. Here, the focus is on the content of the views and on their relationship with the "core beliefs of the majority of society" (Arthur 2015: 314). Extremism can be an opposition to democracy (Davies & Limbada 2019: 4; Onursal & Kirckpatrick 2021: 1105) and human rights (Davies 2008: 621). According to this perspective, the aim of counter-radicalisation activities is to 'defeat' extremist ideology (Onursal & Kirckpatrick 2021: 1108).

In practice, the attitude regarding "an opponent of democracy" may also depend on whether the actor involved scores negatively on two other indicators (use of violence, structure of thinking). Thus, when opponents of democracy do not resort to political violence (and/or do not impose their view on others), some scholars have argued that they should not be banned from democratic participation (Mudde 2016: 133). Thus, a renowned scholar of extremism and populism, Cas Mudde (2016: 130), states:

> I argue that extremists, like all (political) minorities, should be allowed to voice their opinions unconditionally, even if their views are not shared by the majority, and therefore not expressed in the state policies.

Besides ambiguities of definition, there are also ambiguities regarding the *duty* of teachers to *engage* with extremism-related themes and situations in the classroom. In cases where the states have adopted national counter-radicalisation programmes (e.g. UK, Finland), the teachers have different kinds of *duties, roles* and *mandates* to tackle extremism in the classroom than they have in a country like Estonia where such a national action plan is missing. Estonian teachers have different 'security-related' *duties* (what they ought to do), *roles* (what teachers in the country are expected to do) and *mandates* (if they tackle extremism in class they know that all major parties involved know that it is legitimate for teachers to do so).

In UK and Finland teachers are expected to monitor students for possible signs of radicalisation (Niemi *et al.* 2018: 3) and to "identify students 'at risk' of radicalisation" (Jerome & Elwick 2020: 222). Due to the lack of a national counter-radicalisation program, Estonian teachers do not necessarily know the working definitions of the related terms (radicalisation, violent extremism), they do not have systematic guidance materials, and they do not have a mandate to tackle such types of extremism in the classroom. Controversies more familiar to Estonian teachers are over the politicisation of 'memory' in Estonian-Russian relations (Laruelle 2021), and over right-wing extremism more recently. In both issues, however, concepts other than radicalisation

and counter-radicalisation have been in use.

Thus, tackling extremism in the classroom is hindered when the relevant institutions (the state, the ministry of education, educational institutions) have not provided guidelines or guidance on how teachers should practically tackle themes and situations related to extremism (Wansink *et al.* 2021).

In Finland there is a National Action Plan for Preventing Extremism and Violent Radicalisation (Niemi *et al.* 2018: 2). A similar national action plan is missing in Estonia. Two materials discuss the role of schools and teachers in preventing and tackling radicalisation, extremism, and provide recommendations (Maasing & Salvet 2018; Nahkur & Maasing 2020), but these are not a part of teacher education, and without a national program these auxiliary materials fail to yield teachers a proper *duty, role* and *mandate* for tackling extremism in the classroom.

Despite such differences, teachers in both Estonia and UK are expected to educate "young people to understand terrorism and to understand contemporary political debates about it, and the ubiquitous media coverage of it" (Jerome & Elwick 2020: 222). Teachers in both countries need appropriate knowledge related to cases that represent *local* manifestations of extremism (UNESCO 2016: 16), because local examples of extremism are the prime sources of radicalisation.

In both contexts (i.e. in countries where there is no national policy, and in countries where there is), teachers are expected to attend to emotions in the classroom, to admit that there are uncertainties that need to be tackled as uncertainties and to allow extreme views to be expressed in the classroom (Davies 2008:621; Misco 2011: 14). In both contexts, extremism "comes to the classroom" due to course subject matter, due to controversies that are socially and politically relevant, and due to extremism-related behaviour and self-expression of the students.

In both contexts, preventing and tackling extremism is one of the school's responsibilities, a topic neither explicitly researched in Estonia (Kilp & Maiberg, *forthcoming*) nor mandated by nation-wide educational programs.

Examples of violent extremism in Estonia have been few and marginal in comparison to Western European countries but have lately been increasing. Considering Islamism, Estonia has three significant cases. Firstly, Abdurrahman Azan (Ivan Sazanakov) left Estonia to fight in Syria in 2013 and joined Islamic extremists. Secondly, two men who supported and organised finances for Sazanakov—Ramil Khalilov and Roman Manko—were later imprisoned for supporting terrorism (ERR 2017). Lastly, in 2020, residence permit of a citizen of Ukraine who had lived most of his life in Estonia was terminated. He had studied Arabic in Saudi Arabia and he is considered to be a threat to public order and security due to alleged radicalisation (Pavlova 2022).

There are also cases of right-wing extremism. The Conservative People's Party of Estonia—in parliament since 2015, a member of government coalition between 2019 and 2021—has had individual members who have been affiliated with or connected to Neo-Nazi groups (mostly outside of Estonia). Regarding students, in 2019, a 13-year old boy from a rural town in Estonia was the leader of the Nazi organisation Feuerkrieg Division. Relevant for this study is that the boy had no problems with classroom behaviour or with studies at school (Salu 2020). Additionally, there is a growing num-

ber of cases where students are groomed or find their way to radical right-wing organisations (Salu 2021).

In Estonia, terrorism and violent extremism is not as serious of a security threat as it is in the UK, France or Germany. However, the theme is also clearly more security related and more relevant in Estonia in 2021 than it was a decade ago.

### *Ambiguity in classroom practice and experience*

The "what should be done?" kind of knowledge regarding extremism is complex and difficult to implement in practice (Jerome & Elwick 2020). Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock argue that the educational treatment of radicalisation and extremism should also address their structural root causes, promote education for social change and avoid "stigmatisation of radicalism and radicalisation in society", because the unwanted outcome will otherwise be that some students will become fearful of speaking out and being labelled as radical (Sukarieh & Tannock 2016: 34).

Teachers who enhance 'education against extremism' should promote "conflict, media and political education, free speech, and advocacy" and *avoid* pedagogy that enhances "instruction, single truths, passivity, silencing and political ignorance" (Rosvall & Öhrn 2014: 339).

There are some general rules. However, a teacher needs to also focus on the individual, contextual, situational (Andersson 2016: 9), which requires teachers to reflect and decide on what to do on the spot, when the student suddenly changes his or her behaviour or self-expression or whether the student engages in an ignorant play with ideas, symbols and slogans or is fully committed to extremist ideology or violent movements.

Furthermore, the excessive 'self-censorship' of educators while discussing extremism-related topics is a potential hindrance. Self-censorship is inherently neither bad nor good (Chamlee-Wright 2019; Mercer 2021). Civility and productive dialogue will inevitably involve some degree of self-censorship (Chamlee-Wright 2019: 542). Self-censorship is negative and problematic when, due to a social fear (of losing friends, of losing status, of becoming a target for ill will), teachers refrain from saying or doing something they believe would be needed or useful (Mercer 2021: 74-75).

To engage efficiently with controversial themes related to extremism, teachers need to master the practical (cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural) skills of management of classroom discussions (Hess 2004; UNESCO 2016: 20-21, 36). 'Self-censorship' is a problem in teaching extremism-related issues when teachers avoid engagement with this subject matter due to: a fear of sanctions from the school director or pupils' parents; the fear that the teaching of sensitive topics may negatively affect the perceptions of their professional quality and status as a teacher; the fear that the teaching of sensitive topics may reveal pupils' prejudices and extremism (Savenije & Goldberg 2019: 40); the teacher's excessive inclination not to offend others (Savenije & Goldberg 2019: 42).

## DATA, PARTICIPANTS, AND METHODOLOGY

This pilot study used an online questionnaire in three weeks between the second half of August and the beginning of September 2021. The questionnaire was made using LimeSurvey and consisted of multiple-choice questions, arrays to evaluate the likelihood of certain acting patterns, and open-ended questions. In addition, participants were encouraged to explain their choices by leaving comments.

The study population consisted of teachers of history, civics, Estonian as a first language and Estonian literature, and religious education.

Teachers of the named subjects were selected as the target group because the likelihood of discussing extremism in the subjects like history (Kello 2016; Raudsepp & Zadora 2019), religious studies (Niemi *et al.* 2018) and civics (Andersson 2016; Hess 2005) is higher than in other subjects taught at schools of general education. Correspondingly, teachers of natural sciences were not included in the sample.

The online questionnaire included 39 questions in five sections: the demographics (9 questions); dealing with extremism in a classroom (6 questions); how topics related to extremism find their way into the classroom (5 questions); personal views (what type of extremist ideology are they personally concerned about; their subjective assessment on the role of schools in prevention of extremism and on the causes and sources of extremism) and reacting to triggers (if they were to meet a student with an extremist worldview, whom would they contact) (11 questions); and self-reflection (7 questions). In a final question we asked respondents to write the name and e-mail address of a teacher who could potentially have dealt with extremism and related topics in their teaching practice.

This study uses data from all questions, except seven questions dealing with personal views on the sources and causes of extremism, and reaction to triggers. The latter were not included because they dealt with normative attitudes and hypothetical situations and not with the practical experiences of the teachers. In sum, teachers responded to and reflected over extremism-related instances in their professional teaching experience, and presented and explained examples in the comments added to their answers.

### *Participants*

The pilot study was opened by 55 (F=48; M=7) educators among whom 14 filled it completely, and 41 left some parts undone. The high proportion of unfinished questionnaires was expected as the design of the inquiry did not require the respondents to provide an answer to all of the questions. The respondents could skip questions under certain circumstances (e.g. those who had not met a student with an extremist worldview could skip follow-up questions presented to those who had answered affirmatively).

The participants' age was between 24 and 66 (average age 48.3; median age 49.5). Among them, nine were teaching Estonian language and literature, 11 history and civics (usually taught by the same individual), and eight participants taught several subjects simultaneously (history, civil society, and religious education).

In the Estonian education system, the teaching load of the educator varies a lot due to the size of the school. For instance, in smaller rural schools, one teacher may be responsible for several subjects, while in bigger urban schools, the teacher can focus on one or two subjects. It is common that the same teacher teaches both history and civics classes because the teacher training of civics is a subset of history teacher training curricula in Estonian universities. Religious studies is an optional subject taught in around 14% of schools (Viilma 2018). As the teaching load of religious studies is very small, it is often an additional responsibility of teachers from other disciplines such as history, art history, or literature.

The teaching experience of the sample varied from 1 to 40 years (average 27.1 years). Among 28 teachers who answered to the questions of the demographics section, eight taught only at an upper secondary school (classes 10-12), the others taught at several levels simultaneously—20 at a secondary school (classes 7-9), 18 at a lower secondary school (classes 4-6) and two at a primary school (classes 1-3). Seventeen of the teachers were from counties (in total 11 counties were represented) and eleven teachers from five cities (six from Tallinn, two from Tartu, and one from Narva, Pärnu and Haapsalu, respectively).

The possible participants were invited to participate in the study through email lists of their subject unions and associations (the Estonian History and Civics Teachers' Association and Association of Estonian Language Teachers). As teachers of religious education do not have a union or association, they were contacted through an email list created and used by the teachers. All the list managers confirmed the call for participation prior to sending the invitation out. Additional invites were sent out to chosen schools in Tallinn, Ida and Lääne Viru county, and Lääne county. The contacts were found from the web pages of the schools.

Participation in the survey was anonymous, the IP-address trackers were turned off. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to submit contact information of teachers who are suitable for the study and could be interested in participating. Altogether, three email addresses were submitted for further contact.

Due to technical malfunctions, three versions of questionnaires were created with principles and questions remaining the same. As a result, 38 educators filled the first questionnaire, 0 the second one, and 17 the third one.

*Method*

The study follows the interpretivist approach and employs a qualitative thematic analysis.

Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021), we used a 'reflective thematic analysis' to identify patterns of meaning based on questions related to people's experiences, views and perceptions. We followed the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87): we familiarised ourselves with the answers given; we identified answers with relevant meaning; we looked for potential themes; we defined and named the themes; we looked for patterns of themes; we produced the report.

Although we also counted the "Yes" and "No" answers given by the respondents

quantitatively, our focus was primarily on the comments added to the answers for four reasons:

(1) The "Yes" and "No" answers did not describe the teachers' experience and the reflective meaning teachers attribute to their experience. Comments added involve information on examples, experiences and meanings framed by the self-reflection of the teachers. In order to identify examples of extremism-related themes, behaviours and views they had witnessed in the classroom, they first reflected on definitions and defining characteristics of extremism and related themes. Thereafter they named examples and cases. As our findings demonstrate, teachers were often uncertain about how to define extremism and extremist ideology as well as whether the example that comes to their mind should be classified as extremism, extremism-related themes, a type of extremism one should be worried about, whether the use of extremism-related symbols is related or un-related to extremist views and/or commitment to an extremist movement.

(2) At some instances we identified the intended meaning not from "Yes" and "No" answers, but from the comment added. For example, to a question "Have you been worried about extremist views of some students?" one respondent answered "Yes" with a comment "There has been no reason." The comment added indicates that the answer "Yes" could also be interpreted as "No".

(3) The groups of both those who answered "Yes" or "No" involved respondents who were unsure whether the example and experience they had in mind should be classified with the term asked in the question, or were uncertain about how exactly to define the related term.

(4) As several teachers were struggling with terms and meanings, their internal reflections were not easily quantifiable.

In sum, we counted the numbers of "Yes" and "No" answers given, but our prime focus was on *what* kind of *experience* and *examples* teachers subjectively classified with the term *extremism* and how (is it violent extremism, an ideological view, use of extremism-related symbols with or without an extremist belief or behaviour), how teachers interpreted what goes on (both cognitively and emotionally) in students involved in their examples and what goes on in teachers themselves (self-censorship, teachers' sensitivity to issues perceived and experienced as sensitive and controversial).

*The shortcomings of the chosen methodological approach*

The questionnaire method yielded a significant amount of information from many teachers on multiple topics. The data attained allowed to map patterns of teachers' experiences, views and reflections and was sufficient for a pilot study.

During the analysis of answers and comments of the respondents, we recognised that the use of interviews would have yielded more of the type of information we were looking for (reflections, examples, experiences). In the research that follows this pilot

study, we will also use interviews.

The number of respondents filling the questionnaire to the end was sufficient for pilot study but could have been higher. The relatively low number of participants was likely due to three reasons. First, the number of participants fully completing an on-line questionnaire tends to be relatively low, irrespective of the research topic.

Second, the timing of data collection was from the middle of August until the first week of September. In the Estonian general education system, the school year begins on the 1st of September. Although most of the teachers were back from their summer holiday by receiving the invitation of participation, most teachers use this time to prepare for the upcoming school year. Therefore, the low number of participants (and people finishing the questionnaire 100%) could be due to the timing - it fell under the very busy preparation period as well as the first week of school during the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

The third possible reason is the relatively low knowledge of Estonian teachers about the content and vocabulary related to extremism and extreme movements. As extremism, especially the contemporary trends, is not widely discussed in the Estonian school system, most teachers do not have training in such topics. Therefore, insecurity, lack of knowledge, and uncertainties related to the topics mentioned above might lead to situations where educators either did not start filling the questionnaire, or did not finish doing it. Again, in the follow-up research this threshold is also likely passed better with interviews than with a questionnaire.

## RESULTS

The results are organised and presented according to eight aspects (some related to questions asked, others related to the disciplinary domain of teachers or to specific patterns that repeated either in the comments or the answers of the respondents).

1. As 'ambiguities' are related to the definition of extremism (discussed in Introduction), Estonian teachers expressed uncertainties about the definition of extremism and whether the examples they have experienced in their teaching practice can be classified as extremism.

To the question "Have you met a student who supports an extremist ideology during the time you have been practicing teaching?", five teachers out of 25 answered that it depends on the definition of extremism or were unsure whether what they had seen and witnessed can be classified as extremism. One teacher, who answered "No", added a comment:

Define extremism. Views cannot be extremist. Ideology can be considered extremist only, when means for its realisation are radical.

Six teachers opted for the answer "I am not sure" and added comments where they expressed uncertainty whether "homophobic self-expression" can be considered an ideology, whether students who praise Hitler's person or activists who are against fur farming fall into the category of extremists, when they are not willing to impose their views on others by force.

A teacher, who wrote "No" to the question which asked whether she has met extremism in the classroom, added a comment that some of her students have praised Nazism, but they had done it for reasons other than adherence to an extremist ideology or movement:

Teenagers love to express extremist views simply with the intention of being in opposition.

Another teacher had met a student whose behaviour was problematic but who did not verbally support any specific form of extremism. She commented:

In a couple of lessons one child in grade 7 answered to questions with a phrase "Allahu akbar" and refused to listen to discussions over homosexual love. They have not directly said or written anywhere that they support some extremist ideology.

2. When asked to think on controversial issues that are related to extremism, some teachers identified extremism with themes such as terrorism, climate, war, group affiliations (Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims) or movements (BLM, Fridays for Future) without specifying how the theme, group or movement is related to extremism (is it a perpetrator or victim). The identification of extremism through themes and actors perceived to be controversial was expected. When examples provided were local, they were more likely to be about extreme nationalism and far right than about terrorism and use of violence.

Teachers were asked to name examples of extremism which are socially controversial in Estonia or politically relevant and have been discussed in the classroom. Among the examples given, the answer 'terrorism' referred to a broad theme but its meaning was quite unambiguous, because the term refers to violent and radical behaviour. Another teacher mentioned the theme of 'climate and environment', also without providing any examples.

Others mentioned specific examples such as Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future Estonia or "refugee was a Muslim", but did not explicate whether these examples were (related to) *targets* or *perpetrators* of extremism or both. For example, "refugee was a Muslim" could possibly relate to both Islamism or radical anti-immigration views. The same pattern repeated when 'Jehovah's Witnesses' were named as an example of religion-related extremism. When the religious group is mentioned without further explanation, it is unclear whether it is meant that Jehovah's Witnesses are an extremist organisation - as they have been classified by the Russian Federation (Fautré 2020)—or that they have been *targeted* by extremist policies of state.

It is important to notice not that they named actors or themes without explanation but that they recognised extremism by identifying themes which are controversial, and then named the actors and themes which in their view were related to extremism.

To a general and the open-ended question "Have you met a student who supports some extremist ideology? If yes, then please describe", ten teachers out of 25 answered "Yes" and six of them wrote an explanation or comment. They highlighted that students rarely have extremist attitudes and worldviews, and when it happens, it is most

likely not a manifestation of full and deep commitment to an extremist ideology.

In addition, when given no options, most examples mentioned by the teachers were about right-wing extremism and racism. They did not at all mention examples that would fall under categories such as 'conspiracy theories', 'environmentalism', 'terrorism' and 'wars' (which were mentioned by some when explicit themes were asked about later).

Two teachers mentioned Nazism and racism, while Anti-Semitism, extreme conservatism, extreme nationalism, homophobia and misogyny were mentioned once. One teacher distinguished between single occurrences and more regularly observed patterns as follows:

I have met some, but not often. From time to time, I have some noisy students who start to express thoughts that are radically homophobic or racist. Such situations do not occur often, but every now and then still. In addition, when in social studies class I let students express their opinion in writing, they express extremist views from time to time.

Another teacher listed several single cases without identifying the regularity of their occurrence:

There has been one student with antisemitic views, one supporter of an extreme conservative youth organisation, and some students whose statements of opinion have been racist or misogynistic.

One teacher focused on '*interest* in Nazism' and wrote that "[t]here have been students interested in Nazism every year". Another focused on '*support* to Nazi ideology" and recalled that "Once I had a student who expressed support to the ideology of NSDAP in an essay".

3. Extreme right ideology (including right-wing extremism, White Supremacy, Nazism, Neo-Nazism) and conspiracy theories are the ideologies and views teachers have witnessed students to support or to be interested in most.

To the explicit question, "Have you met a student who supports 'right-wing' ideology (skinhead movement, Nazism)? If yes, then please describe", 11 out of 25 answered "Yes" and seven of the latter added a comment or explanation. When we asked about 'right-wing' ideology and the wording of the question included 'Nazism', the number of positive responses increased by one, but the overall pattern of teachers' assessments observed above repeated—the examples witnessed occurred rarely and, by the teachers' assessment, the involvement of students with 'right-wing' extremism tends to be superficial.

Teachers mentioned Nazism six times and one of them specified "Neo-Nazism rather than Nazism". Another teacher observed that students have played and made jokes with their interest in White Supremacy and Nazism:

White Supremacy, Nazism—but in the form of a joke, short statement or gesture, neither seriously nor from conviction.

A typical observation is that while there have been students interested in a given

ideology, their interest has been superficial:

Sometimes, but not often, there have been students who have been interested in National Socialism. Mostly it has not been about a fully developed Nazi-ideology, they cannot be called real skinheads. Rather, they have been boys-teenagers who have simply been interested in the theme. They have often been interested in the theme merely superficially, without any deep involvement, and thus have considered themselves to be Nazis.

A significant proportion of "Yes" answers (9) were given to a question related to 'conspiracy theories.' 'Conspiracy theories' is an extremism-related theme that teachers tend to be subjectively most worried about, yet in their comments they tended to repeat options presented in the question and did not add many examples of their own.

Three teachers mentioned conspiracy theories related to vaccination (including anti-vaxxers) and the (denial of) coronavirus. Only one teacher mentioned a conspiracy theory not related to the coronavirus:

I have met some students who have thought that the society of the world is being led by a hidden group of people.

The teachers also mentioned other worldviews and ideologies (Islamism, extreme nationalism, religious extremism, extreme leftism, extreme environmentalism) that they had witnessed being supported by students, but these ideologies were mentioned by not more than two teachers each. Among the latter, only extreme nationalism was explicitly related to social (inter-ethnic) relations in Estonia.

4. Although about half of the history teachers had met a student who supports an extremist worldview and the other half had not, there was still a discipline-specific pattern in which themes were identified as related to extremism. Communism, Nazism and Fascism, as well as wars in the Middle East and in Muslim-Majority countries, were the most often mentioned themes in history classes, while climate and conspiracy theories were the extremism-related themes less specific to any subject matter.

To the question "During the period of your teaching practice, have you met a student who supports an extremist ideology?", five teachers of history answered "No", while six answered "Yes". The pattern of answers was different when the question asked was about extremism-related themes that need to be discussed because of the course subject matter.

Not surprisingly, religious fundamentalism is discussed most often in the class of religious studies, and Communism, Nazism and Fascism in classes of history.

The discussion of more contemporary phenomena—wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, climate protests, refugees and immigration, minority rights and gender equality, fur farming, Covid-19—are less likely to only be discussed in classes of a specific subject matter.

5. When teachers noticed students using ambiguous symbols, memes and pictures that are related to extremism, they mostly observed phenomena related

to Nazism (e.g., drawings of swastika) and symbols of Communism/the USSR. In their assessment, students did not fully grasp the meaning of the symbols. When teachers noticed such phenomena, they were not particularly worried, and did not consider such instances as being beyond their ability to handle or as indicators of the students' commitment to an extremist ideology.

To the question whether they have seen symbols, memes, pictures etc. that are related to extremism being used by the students, symbols of Nazis were mentioned by nine teachers, and symbols of the USSR and Communism by four teachers.

Irrespective of whether the symbols were about Nazism, Communism, Satanism, White Supremacy or the picture of Che Guevara, the teachers generally did not express concern. They seemed confident that they can master such situations in class, and interpreted the cases where, for example, students wore shirts with symbols of Satanism or with the picture of Che Guevara, as instances where students either wanted to provoke someone (a teacher or other students) or did not really understand what the given symbol meant.

6. When asked about what kind of extremism teachers are most worried about, the respondents most often named 'conspiracy theories' and Islamism. When the question was limited to contemporary Estonia or "in the context of your school", teachers most often mentioned right-wing extremism and extreme nationalism.

When asked about extremist ideologies that make teachers worried in general, nine teachers named beliefs in conspiracy theories. They mentioned the denial of Covid-19, resistance to vaccination or to wearing protective masks, but in an individual case also the Flat-Earth theory. Among the reasons why conspiracy theories make teachers worried were: "other people will suffer", and "it can have a direct negative impact on the health and welfare of individuals and their relatives."

Six teachers, who were worried about Islamism, expressed worries over the terrorism and human casualties that accompany Islamism. One teacher, however, added a comment:

Oftentimes, everything related to Islam is considered Islamism.

Other extremisms were mentioned less frequently. One comment explained a worry related specifically to extreme leftism:

[This] ideology is imposed too strongly over people, it belittles and despises those who disagree.

Another teacher listed worries specific to climate extremism:

It involves too many double standards, hypocrisy, fanaticism and scaring of people.

Additionally, one teacher wanted to explicitly express the position of "not being worried":

Because I am not worried. Such movements have always existed. I trust that democracy and the state are sufficiently strong in Estonia, none of these can do any

major harm to our society.

When asked about an ideology that makes one worried in the context of Estonia or schools, five teachers mentioned right-wing or extreme nationalism without adding explanations.

Three teachers, however, expressed concerns that they have had over instances where a student in class either was in a vulnerable situation or expressed extremist views. Regarding the latter, one teacher wrote:

I think that this young person has been in a search of understanding and such opinions will not remain with him for long.

Another teacher wrote:

When I see a student who has become isolated and withdrawn due to their world-view, then I consult with some specialist in the school.

A third teacher wrote that they had been worried about Russian-speaking students who wore the Ribbon of St George—a symbol of Russian nationalism (Kolstø 2016)—in a class with predominantly Estonian-minded students.

7. The twelve teachers that responded to the open-ended question "what is the role of education in the prevention of extremism" approached the issue from four perspectives: knowledge from historic experience; a need for an approach that is based on facts, knowledge and science; competence to form an informed opinion; the ability to distinguish what should be considered extremism and what should not.

Teachers who expressed their views were generally enthusiastic about the positive role of education in the prevention of extremism. Their assessments differed in the details and fell into four perspectives.

First, education contributes to extremism prevention by teaching the *lessons of history*. One teacher wrote:

You recognise the tree by its fruit. Education reminds us what the end of extremism was. When somebody says that Hitler was a great statesman, I always respond that he failed. Due to his actions, the German state was destroyed, the influence of Germany and German language diminished. Not to mention the sufferings that he caused to other peoples.

Another teacher pointed to a lesson to be learned from Communists:

Communists also tried to raise a new type of human being. One learns in school about the consequences of their deeds...

A third teacher generalised and wrote:

We can show from all of history what the outcomes of extremism can be.

Second, education fulfils its positive mission when teaching is based on *facts, knowledge* and *science*. One teacher wrote:

Regarding anti-vaccinationism, the school should take a position that is unam-

biguous and based on science. I am worried because there are also teachers at school who refuse vaccination due to their own ideological views.

Third, particularly regarding extremism-related issues, some teachers highlight the positive role of an informed debate, which enhances understanding and allows students to take stand on controversial issues. In their comments, teachers wrote:

… students understand when they have discussed things through;

… it is better to discuss these themes than to search information from the internet on your own;

Students are quite insecure in their views. They often imitate opinions out of ignorance. Schools are safe spaces where all terms and their referents can be explained and understood. Many have later admitted that they now think more deeply about these issues or are more confident in participating in the related discussions.

Fourth, three teachers particularly highlighted the need to deal with the definition of extremism. One teacher wrote:

Education can prevent extremism only when the student recognises and knows what it is that can be considered extremism.

Another teacher questioned the negative frames that tend to accompany the term:

In theory, extremism is a phenomenon that could be needed or even useful. The whole issue is biased and loaded with premises.

A third teacher wrote:

It is of highest importance to teach children critical and analytical thinking. Yet, the teacher needs to create an atmosphere (in class and at school) which allows children to freely choose what to believe in; we can debate, but we cannot say to anyone that their worldview is wrong and that they are not allowed to believe in it; education needs to give such a perspective which allows children to distinguish humane and positive ideologies from extremist and violent ones.

8. Regarding the way they handle extremism-related content and situations in the classroom, teachers did not express any major challenges or hindrances. They did express some caution in applying a classification of extremism in specific situations of their teaching experience but were not particularly or excessively 'self-censored' when their teaching practice involves extremism-related themes.

The questionnaire included a set of questions where we wanted to know whether teachers have questions related to extremism that they feel they need to discuss with students but have refrained from such discussions, or vice versa, whether there have been extremism-related questions the students want to discuss but the teachers refrain from (feel self-censored). To our surprise, teachers did not express any significant 'internally perceived hindrances' in what they want, feel obliged to do or have to

do as teachers regarding extremism-related content.

When some teachers mentioned instances and themes that could be classified under the category of self-censorship, these instances seemed to be rare occasions. They did not represent a general habitual disposition framing the way they deal with extremist-related content in class.

Nevertheless, some teachers mentioned that they have met students who want to avoid themes like 'same-sex love' or abortion. One teacher tried to avoid the discussion of sexual relations and pregnancy, "because all they need to know is written in a textbook. I have nothing to add". Another teacher wrote that she tries to avoid themes which could be offending or particularly sensitive to some students in the class. Two teachers mentioned that they have experienced some pressure from parents, and two other teachers said that they try to avoid private issues but students keep bringing them up.

## DISCUSSION

Firstly, the results show that not all Estonian teachers who participated in the study have faced or discussed extremism in a classroom.

Secondly, the participating educators do see the importance of education in preventing and tackling (violent) extremism. Several of them struggle with defining the terms (e.g., 'extremism', 'terrorism') and with the interpretation of student behaviour, which is a positive feature, because (as discussed in Introduction) extremism involves ambiguities and the competence to decide and act without seeking fixed rules.

Thirdly, the teachers who had tackled extremism in the classroom tended to hope that 'what happens in the classroom, is solved in the classroom'. However, if teachers are alone in such situations and need to make decisions on their own, they would benefit from guidance materials that provide alternative modes of action on the context-based themes and situations, as well as the knowledge about the choices of teachers in Estonia. The latter would empower *teachers* not only to make appropriate decisions, but would also make them more confident in tackling extremism in the classroom.

As extremism is a dynamic phenomenon—new movements and groups keep emerging—enhanced political and media literacy (Jerome & Elwick 2019) is needed for both teachers and students.

Finally, the primary 'local' topics related to extremism in Estonia are coronavirus and right-wing extremism. The popularity of right-wing extremism has been growing over the last few years due to grievances and uncertainties related to economic instability and perceived need to strengthen a group identity through feelings of superiority (Niemi et al. 2018: 5). More recently, the increasingly perceived challenge of extremism related to the denial of the Covid-19 virus or resistance to vaccination. Novel overlap between the two (Falkenbach & Greer 2021) existed in lower intensity during August and the beginning of September 2021, when respondents filled the questionnaire of this study, and reached to a much higher level of intensity two months later when the daily number of deaths due to coronavirus was often higher than the number

was for whole month (2) of August. There is a threat that the local right-wing populists do politicise topics related to coronavirus, including the need for vaccination. When this happens, teachers face a new topic that they need to discuss with their students in these uncertain times.

## CONCLUSIONS

This pilot study examined 55 Estonian educators' (of whom 25 provided answers to most questions) experiences in discussing topics related to extremism with students and colleagues, as well as an overview of topics that students have raised.

Less than half of the teachers mentioned instances where they had met students supporting or following an extremist ideology. Most of the latter were not fully certain about how to classify the cases they had in mind. They struggled with 'ambiguity' that is partly due to the phenomenon and partly due to the Estonian system of education that does not include a nation-wide program for prevention of extremism or counter-radicalisation in education. Correspondingly, teachers feel quite uncertain about what their exact *duty*, *role* and *mandate is* as far as extremism is concerned.

Regarding the way in which teachers handle extremism-related content and situations in the classroom, they did not express any major challenges or hindrances. They do express some caution in applying a classification of extremism in specific situations of their teaching experience, but they are not particularly or excessively 'self-censored' in their teaching practice.

As the likelihood of teachers facing extremism-related topics in classrooms is increasing, we believe that there is a need to create guidance materials that take into account the Estonian context, to support teachers in preventing and tackling extremism. Additionally, when the Estonian state will adopt a national counter-extremism programme, teachers will have a better comprehension and perception in regard to what their exact *duty*, *role* and *mandate* is in tackling extremism in the classroom.

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