Article

From playground extremism to neo-Nazi ideology – Finnish educators' perceptions of violent radicalisation and extremism in educational institutions

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Highlights:

- Finnish educators confront ideologically challenging situations
- Some of these instances include features of extremism
- Educators have difficulties in distinguishing extremism from otherwise challenging behaviours
- These difficulties emerge especially when students from societal minority groups are involved
- Educators' competencies need to be developed and extremism-related preconceptions reflected through in-service training

Purpose: The role of formal education is currently viewed as central in preventing violent radicalisation and extremism (VRE), however educators' understanding or competencies have not been developed accordingly. Therefore, this study investigates Finnish educators' perceptions of presumed manifestations of VRE among their students.

Findings: Finnish educators confront ideologically and morally challenging situations, some of which include extremist features. They do, however, have difficulties in distinguishing VRE from other types of motives for hostile or violent rhetoric or behaviour, especially if students from societal minority groups are involved.

Practical implications False labelling may have negative consequences on students. Educators need VRE-related in-service training that focuses on increasing educators' knowledge and reflection on their VRE-related preconceptions and intuitive responses to these.

Research limitations: We acknowledge the possible skewness of the survey data as responding may have felt appealing to those educators who have encountered VRE or who are interested or worried about VRE.

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1   INTRODUCTION

The polarisation of attitudes, the spread of disinformation and conspiracies as well as the increase of suspicions and hatred poses a wide variety of threats to contemporary societies, and they may, at worst, also lead to violent radicalisation and extremism (henceforth VRE). As VRE represent major challenges not only to the security of the societies but also to peace and inner cohesion (e.g., Neumann, 2017), Western societies have witnessed an unprecedented urgency to draft strategies and policies to prevent and counter violent extremism (henceforth PVE and CVE) (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018).

During the last decade, P/CVE policies and measures have not merely intensified, but their scope has also become significantly broader. In addition to the "hard measures" of the security and surveillance authorities to counter threats posed by extremist movements and terrorism, so-called "soft measures", which target larger populations to prevent harmful developments long before violence or illegal actions occur, have become more widespread (e.g., Sivenbring, 2019).

Today, the adoption of the "whole of society" approach – according to which P/CVE are defined as a collective, nationwide task – is common, and P/CVE policies are incorporated into the governance and practices of many societal sectors, such as formal education, public health and social and youth services (e.g. Mattsson & Säljö, 2018; Neumann, 2017; Sivenbring, 2019). However, as each societal sector has its specific operational frameworks, epistemological perspectives, and organisational realities, instead of one discussion on P/CVE, there are multiple conversations within and between different sectors and national contexts (Miller & Chauhan, 2017; Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2019)

This article focuses on the education sector, as educational institutions (henceforth EIs) in several countries, including Finland, have been drawn into their governments' P/CVE responses and educators are currently viewed as central agents in the national P/CVE action plans (see e.g., Niemi et al., 2018; European Commission, 2020; Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2020; Siegel et al., 2019). For example, in 2020, Finland published its third National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism which, for the first time, included a separate chapter dedicated to the education sector (see Ministry of the Interior, 2020, pp. 74–81). However, considering the global weight and importance of the prevention of violent extremism through education (henceforth PVE-E), surprisingly few studies have been conducted on first-line practitioners, the ones who are assigned to implement the national P/CVE policies as part of their daily duties.

We believe that the merging intersection of formal education and governmental policies related to P/CVE and the implementation of these policies makes it acute to investigate how educators understand, and encounter issues related to VRE. Within this study, a critical examination of Finnish educators' understanding of VRE in the context of their work will be presented. Our analysis yields information on the way educators perceive the phenomena more generally. This study aims to provide insights into the planning and implementation of the national PVE-E policies and the planning of in-service training for educators' professional development. The findings are of special interest to

policymakers, teacher training and educators themselves. The findings can have special relevance to the teachers of social science education, as their classes are natural arenas for discussions on ideology, activism, extremism, and terrorism and themes related to these, as well as for practising critical thinking, questioning, and constructive dissent (see e.g., Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020; Hiljanen, 2022).

2 PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH EDUCATION (PVE-E)

In the following, we will briefly describe why and how within the last decades across Europe PVE-E has become included in educators' daily work. We will also outline some critical considerations that have been voiced after the PVE-E tasks were assigned to EIs.

2.1 Educators as "antennas of society"

Along with traditional police, security, military and surveillance authorities, the policy-level discourse has made formal education educators crucial actors in implementing national P/CVE policies in Europe (Benjamin et al., 2021a). Assigning P/CVE-related responsibilities to formal education was expected, as historically, many other perceived societal harms and threats have been addressed in and through the educational systems (Mattsson & Säljö, 2018). VRE can be seen as the latest addition to the "long list of social ills that teachers are meant to cure" (Neumann 2017, p. 48) and, as such, a new feature attached to the educators' profession (Revell, 2019).

The understandable argument for PVE-E lies in the fact that children and adolescents spend most of their days in EIs interacting with their educators (Siegel et al., 2019). Due to daily interaction, educators are in a unique position to spot the possible early signs of changes in the well-being, behaviours, attitudes, or appearance of their students. As educators also get to witness and address first-hand the effects and consequences that the various conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies spreading online may have on students (Benjamin et al., 2021a), they, as well as youth workers mentioned in the van de Weert and Eijkman (2019) article, can be seen as the "antennas of society".

Another argument for PVE-E is the power inherent in all formal education to guide students' worldview development (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2021b), identity formation (Erikson, 1968), empathy and critical thinking skills, and agency (Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020; Hiljanen, 2022) as well as growth towards active and democratic citizenship, (e.g., Christodoulou & Szakàcs, 2018; Davies, 2016; Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020; Hiljanen, 2022). For example, in a study conducted by Fornaciari and Rautiainen (2020), Finnish teachers considered raising responsible and justice-oriented citizens as the main goal of civic education.

In addition, children and adolescents are more vulnerable to external influence, such as manipulation and propaganda (Harpviken, 2019), and therefore suitable targets of extremist groups' recruitment attempts (Bloom, 2017). It is also noted that young people are "disproportionately affected by violent extremism, both as victims and perpetrators" (Neumann, 2017, p. 46).

Further, there is transformative potential in education for both individual and societal changes (see e.g., Ghosh et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2021). Within a nation, the development of desired attitudes, skills and behaviours of future generations can be steered through curricular objectives and contents. Through this, formal schooling enables the building or maintaining of social cohesion and integration of newcomers (Niemi et al., 2018). This is however also true in non-democratic contexts, such as in current Afghanistan or Syria, where extremist groups use education to indoctrinate their worldviews onto new generations (see also Ghosh et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2019).

2.2   Critical considerations on PVE-E

Despite the general global consensus that education must do its part in P/CVE (e.g., Kühle & Lindekilde, 2010; Mattsson, 2018), criticism has also been voiced. For example, PVE-E has been seen as an instrument of surveillance and public safety, ultimately leading to the securitisation of educational spaces (e.g., Heath-Kelly, 2017; Revell, 2019) – in some cases even at the expense of pupils' constitutional rights (Mattsson & Säljö, 2018). Further, there are discussions on classrooms being transformed into 'pre-crime spaces', in other words, into places, in which educators are supposed to anticipate and detect harm before it even occurs (Heath-Kelly, 2017; see also Revell, 2017). These fears are well-grounded, as the missions of public safety and education are and should be divergent: "While intelligence investigators look primarily for suspects, teachers aim to educate and transform their students. Although there may be an overlap somewhere, these goals are clearly distinctive" (Sieckelinck et al., 2015, p. 331).

Nevertheless, some European countries have instructed educators to search for and report to the authorities students who might be radicalised or at risk of radicalisation (see e.g. Mattsson, 2019; Revell, 2019). This mission is typically related to the national and curricular objectives to safeguard and promote national values[1] and counter "extremist" values and worldviews through education (e.g., European Commission, 2020). Unfortunately, however, there is often no consensus about or a clear definition of which values or worldviews should be viewed as problematic or "extremist" (Niemi et al, 2018; van de Weert & Eijkman, 2019). This is a fundamental challenge, as it can lead to varying subjective interpretations of educators about the signs, utterances, and behaviours that they consider "extremist" or going "against the national/curricular values", thus endangering the freedom of individuality, expression and ultimately, the equality of their students (Van San et al., 2013).

The heaviest criticism targeted towards the reporting duty is that these kinds of expectations are simply beyond the professional capacities of educators (Harris-Hogan et al., 2019). Research findings also demonstrate that these types of approaches – or "unjust and futile tasks" as put by Sjøen (2021) – may risk the trustful relationship between the students and educators (see also Parker et al., 2021), increase suspicion, prejudices and stigmatisation of certain ethnicities or religious groups (Davies, 2016; Revell, 2019), lead to misunderstandings and over-reporting by educators (Harris-Hogan et al., 2019) and, as a

result, undermine students' and their families' trust towards formal education (Parker et al., 2021).

Another layer of complexity comes from the complicated relationship between beliefs and actions – in other words, cognition and behaviour – which has been a central binary in VRE-related discussions (e.g., McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017): all violence should not be interpreted as extremist and not all extremists are violent (Cassam, 2021). Indeed, the causal link between radical beliefs and violent behaviour is not straightforward (e.g., Miller & Chauhan, 2017). As observed by Sageman (2011, p. 117), "Ten years of counterterrorism practice has taught us that many people say very violent things, but very few follow up with violent actions", and noted by Horgan and Taylor (2011, p. 174), "not every terrorist is necessarily 'radical' (i.e., holding politically or religiously extreme views)". In the same vein, Miller and Chauhan (2017, p. 38) conclude that "the assumption that radical ideas constitute the first step on the road to violence risks securitising legitimate dissent and can be counter-productive, fuelling social exclusion and mistrust".

The distinction is, however, critical, as sympathisers of extremist ideologies commonly outnumber those directly engaged in violence (e.g., Khalil et al., 2022; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). While banning the use of violence is a simple and straightforward objective in EIs – as well as in society at large – it is more complex to interpret and recognise the cognitive manifestations of VRE among students. In this vein, Benjamin et al., (2021a) argue that, in the framework of PVE-E, more understanding of what exactly should be prevented and, in turn, promoted is needed. However, the pedagogical dimension of PVE-E seems to be insufficient and largely overlooked in PVE-E policies (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2021a; Christodoulou, 2020; Mattsson, 2019). Educators are often puzzled by the PVE-E duties and feel ill-equipped and under-resourced to cope with the demands it is imposing (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020; Ragazzi, 2017; Van San et al., 2013). Beršnak and Prezelj (2021) call for a clearer "compass" to guide educators with these new educational tasks.

As the radicalisation of students is a relatively rare and marginal phenomenon, it is also hard for educators to "learn from experience" (van de Weert & Eijkman, 2019). Therefore, those who are supposed to address, prevent, and detect radicalisation should be properly trained and given adequate knowledge and expertise to be able to fulfil these assignments. However, in many countries, for example in Finland, this has not been the case (see e.g., Niemi et al., 2018).

The urge to increase educators' science-based knowledge of VRE draws on an understanding that educators, healthcare professionals (Heath-Kelly & Strausz, 2019), and citizens in general (Malkki et al., 2021) are most likely drawing on their understanding of VRE from the media and popular culture. For example, Van de Veert and Eijkman's (2019) study on civil servants' assessment of signs of radicalisation in youth revealed that their risk assessments relied strongly on the civil servants' "gut feelings", intuition or, as we call them, *intuitive responses*. It is obvious that the implementation of an important national-level mission cannot rely on such fragile ground.

3   DATA AND METHODS

To develop in-service training on PVE-E, this study critically examines Finnish formal education educators' subjective perceptions of the prevalence and manifestations of VRE among their students in EIs, and indirectly their understanding and intuitive responses to themes related to VRE. The research problem will be answered through the following research questions: 1) Have Finnish educators encountered violent radicalisation and/or extremism-related issues among their students in educational institutions? and 2) What kind of manifestations of presumed violent radicalisation and/or extremism the educators have encountered? The main emphasis of this study is on the analysis of answers provided to research question 2.

The data for the present study were collected during the spring of 2018 through an online questionnaire. Besides the basic demographic questions, the online questionnaire consisted of several multiple-choice questions and six open-ended questions, all related to VRE. The participants were also provided with the national definition of violent radicalisation and extremism as part of the questionnaire, produced by the Finnish Ministry of the Interior (2020[2]). Research permission for the study was acquired from selected municipalities if it was required, and participation for the educators was voluntary. Contacted EIs were randomly selected using proportionate stratified random sampling to guarantee that the sample reflected the structure of the population (see e.g. Lynn, 2016). A link to the online questionnaire was sent to 859 EIs out of the 2863 Finnish EIs, and the principals or school leaders were asked to distribute the link to their EI's educators. Altogether, 1149 educators answered the questionnaire. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, naming the respondents' EI and the municipality was not mandatory, so no exact response rate of the sampled EIs can be measured.

Respondents consisted of educators working under different professional titles (e.g., teacher; principal; special needs assistant; member of school welfare group, such as psychologist, nurse, or school social worker) in Finnish and Swedish-speaking[3] institutions of basic, general upper secondary, or vocational education. Geographically, the sample covered different-sized EIs in urban, semi-urban and rural regions throughout Finland. A summary of the respondents' demographics is presented in Table 1.

4   FINDINGS

It must be highlighted that the findings reported in this section do not epitomise the real prevalence or manifestations of VRE in Finnish EIs, nor the authors' understanding of the extent or nature of VRE in Finnish EIs. Instead, the findings describe Finnish educators' *subjective perceptions* about the prevalence and manifestations of VRE in the context of their work, and thus, indirectly, their *understanding* and *intuitive responses* about the themes related to VRE.

4.1 Prevalence of violent radicalisation and extremism in educational institutions according to Finnish educators

To answer the first research question: Have Finnish educators encountered violent radicalisation and/or extremism-related issues among their students in educational institutions? the respondents were asked to respond either "yes" or "no" to the following questions: 1) Have you encountered in your work students who express violent extremist beliefs/thoughts (e.g., embracing extremist ideology/accepting the use of violence)? and 2) Have you encountered in your work violently radicalised students (e.g., committing extremist violence or directly supporting the use of violence)?

Table 1. Research participants' demographics and percentages of educators who reported having encountered violent radicalisation and extremism

Respondents, total n=1149	x% of respondents reported having encountered violent radicalisation and extremism, n=260
gender:	
female, n=831	**25.5%** (n=212)
male, n=312	**14.1%** (n=44)
other, n=6	**66.7%** (n=4)
professional title:*	
special needs assistant, n=56	**41.1%** (n=23)
teacher, n=944	**21.1%** (n=199)
principal, n=169	**22.5%** (n=38)
school welfare team member, n=110	**30%** (n=33)
education level:*	
basic education, n=809	**24.8%** (n=201)
general upper secondary education, n=232	**17.7%** (n=41)
vocational education, n=200	**21.5%** (n=43)
vocational adult education, n=93	**19.4%** (n=18)
educational institution's language:	
Finnish, n=1071	**23.7%** (n=254)
Swedish, n=78	**7.7%** (n=6)
municipal population:**	
less than 100 000, n=782	**19.9%** (n=156)
more than 100 000, n=367	**28.3%** (n=104)

* A total number of respondents operating under certain professional titles or in certain education level are not exactly 1149, as some of the respondents indicated that they worked under different professional titles, and some at different levels of education.
** Number of that municipal's population, in which respondents' educational institution located

    The results show that out of 1149 respondents, 217 (19%) reported having encountered students expressing violent extremist beliefs or thoughts, and 148 (13%) of respondents

reported having met violently radicalised students in their educational institutions (see Figure 1). By filtering the data, it was found that altogether 260 (23%) respondents had answered 'yes' to one or both questions, and thus indicated having encountered manifestations of VRE among their students.

As can be seen in Table 1, 25.5% of female educators and 14.1% of male educators reported presumed encounters with VRE. 24.8% of educators, who worked in basic education, 17.7% of educators working in upper secondary, 21.5% of educators working in vocational and 19.4% of educators working in vocational adult education reported manifestations of students' presumed VRE. In Finnish-speaking EIs 23.7% of educators and in Swedish-speaking EIs only 7.7% reported experiences with VRE. 28.3% of educators working in municipalities of more than 100 000 inhabitants and 19.9% of educators working in municipalities of less than 100 00 inhabitants reported presumed manifestations of VRE.

As the percentages indicating Finnish educators' presumed encounters with VRE were high, in the following, the instances educators had associated with VRE will be described in detail.

4.2   Manifestations of presumed violent radicalisation and/or extremism in educational institutions according to Finnish educators

If the respondents answered "yes" to the aforementioned questions (encounters with 1. extremist beliefs/thoughts or 2. violent radicalisation among their students) they were asked to describe these situations more specifically in their own words with an open-ended question. Despite 260 of the 1149 respondents indicating having encountered manifestations of VRE among their students (by answering 'yes' to questions 1 or 2), altogether 284 respondents described their experiences with VRE in EIs in the open-ended question. The qualitative answers (n=284) gained from these respondents constitute the main data for this study.

To answer the second and the main research question of this study: *What kind of manifestations of presumed violent radicalisation and/or extremism the educators have encountered?* the qualitative answers (n=284) were analysed using thematic, data-driven content analysis with Atlas.ti. The content analysis proceeded in three phases. In the first phase of the analysis, the open-ended answers were summarised, coded, and grouped further according to their similarities and differences, resulting in a total number of 250 codes in the Atlas.ti programme. In the second phase, the codes were further grouped into sub-groups according to their content. Finally, the sub-groups were categorised under two main categories, namely, cognitive, and behavioural manifestations of presumed VRE. The analytical process, as well as the summary of the main findings, are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Summary of the analytical process and main findings
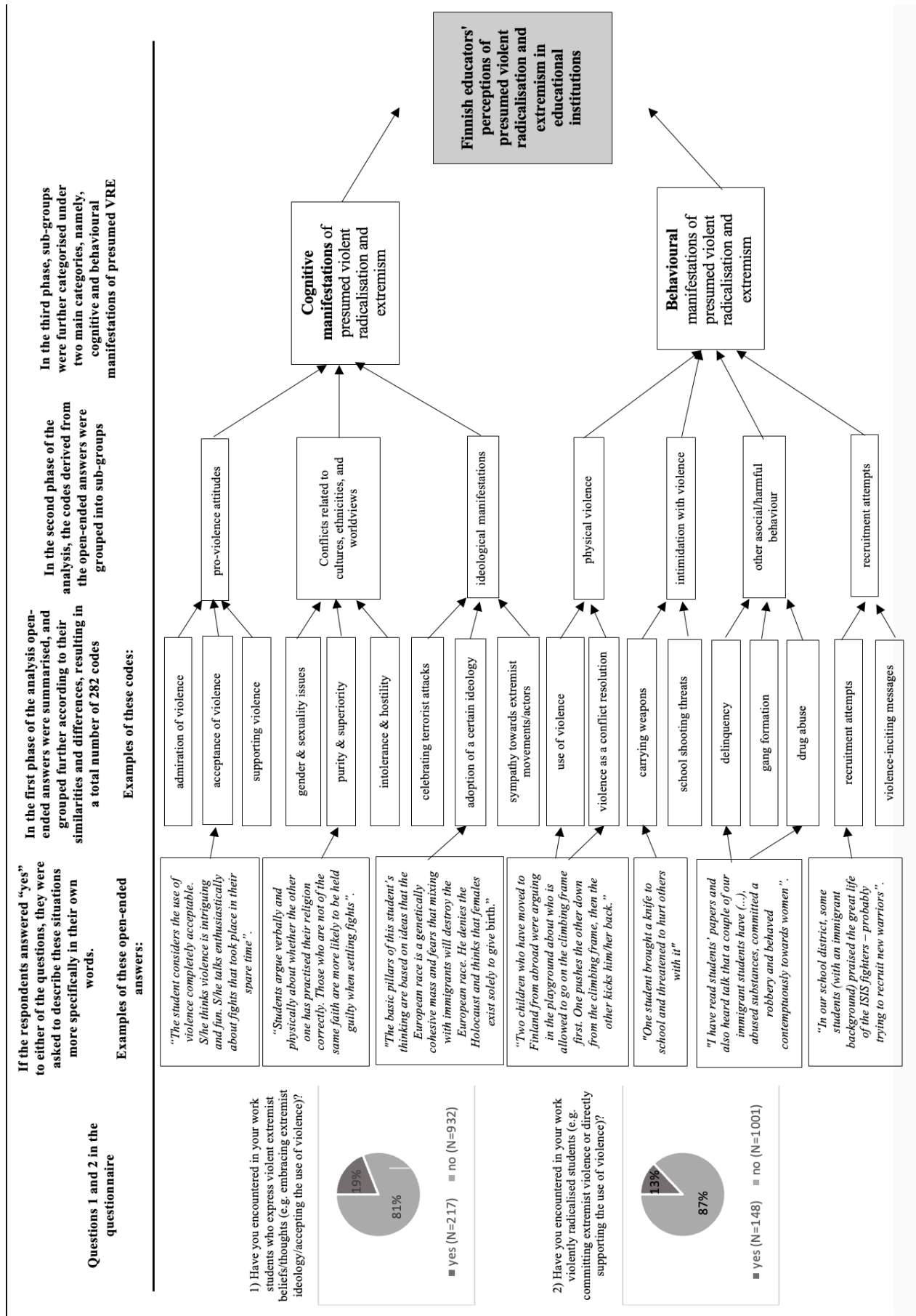
In the following chapters, the sub-groups under the two main categories of cognitive and behavioural manifestations of presumed VRE will be presented in detail. To make Finnish educators' "voices" heard, and to be able to observe the ways they understand VRE-related issues, quotes from the data will be presented. In the quotes, the respondents describe observations they have made about presumed manifestations of VRE among their students. The quotes have been translated verbatim from Finnish or Swedish into English by the authors. Some concepts used in the quotes from educators' responses are contested and do not represent the authors' conceptualisations.

4.2.1 Cognitive manifestations of presumed violent radicalisation and extremism

In the analysis of educators' experiences of presumed manifestations of VRE, three subgroups of *cognitive manifestations* were found, namely 1) pro-violence attitudes, 2) conflicts related to cultures and/or worldviews and 3) ideological manifestations (see Figure 1).

Pro-violence attitudes

Pro-violence attitudes were the most common cognitive manifestation of presumed VRE reported by educators. These manifested, for example, through students' expressions of admiration, acceptance, support, or justification of violence, as well as interest or sympathy towards the use of violence:

> Q1: "The student considers the use of violence completely acceptable. S/he thinks violence is intriguing and fun. S/he talks enthusiastically about fights that took place in their spare time".

Some educators described the processes through which they estimated the pro-violence attitudes of the students had evolved. For example, in quote 2, an educator depicts a student who had faced discrimination, and offensive, racist language and who justified his/her use of violence as a way to adapt to the situation.

> Q2: "[I have heard a student] speaking about violence being justified if one is being a target of racist name-calling and feels like a second-class citizen, who is being stared at in the streets and shops. 'If they consider me as a terrorist, then it is better that they are afraid if they do not respect me'".

There were also many accounts in which the educators said that the students' pro-violence attitudes had been adopted from home and the students had been instructed to use violence by their family members.

Pro-violence attitudes were observed, for example, in students who had strong opinions about immigrants, refugees or specific ethnic minorities and who saw violence as a justified and necessary way to control the "non-native" social groups in Finland. As demonstrated by the following quotes 3 and 4, some students considered violence towards

immigrants or refugees justified, as according to their views, immigrants were "abusing social benefits".

Q3: "Student explains that violence towards immigrants is legitimate because according to him/her, 'they misuse the [Finnish] social benefits system, and thus all of them [immigrants] should be expelled'".

Q4: "There have been racist statements and allegations about refugees, about how they misuse our social benefits and thus rob from 'the native Finns'. Therefore, they [students] don't view the actions of violent extremists as reprehensible but as a natural response to the unfair situation".

Some respondents did question the connection between the students' pro-violence attitudes and VRE. They reflected, for example, on students' age and their cognitive ability to embrace certain ideologies (see quote 5). One educator stated that despite the students' pro-violence attitudes, calling a primary school student "radicalised" is exaggerated, and another educator reasoned that young children are not "ideological" but may consider it "cool", for example, to wear certain clothes or symbols with violent connotations.

Q5: "In my previous workplace, a 4th grader spoke acceptingly of violence against Americans. You have to, however, take into account that a child that age is just a child and probably reflects the worldview of those around him/her".

Conflicts related to cultures, ethnicities, and worldviews

The diversity of the student body in EIs was sometimes viewed as the main reason for conflicts between students (see quotes 6 and 7), and reversely, the non-existence of VRE was sometimes explained by the fact that "*there are very few immigrants in our school district*". Many alleged manifestations of VRE reported by educators were linked to conflicts between diverse cultures, ethnicities, or worldviews. Respondents described these conflicts as stemming from the students' intolerance and hostility towards differing views and group identities or feelings of superiority.

Q6: "As our school is heavily multicultural, during recess there are a lot of violent behaviours and conflicts between students from different cultural backgrounds".

Q7: "When there are a lot of immigrant students, different extremist thinking can also occur. Not outright radicalisation, but there are chances for that also".

Educators expressed their concerns about students, who emphasised the purity or superiority of their own worldview/culture (see quote 8) and, stigmatised others as infidels, presented rough critiques targeted towards the Western or Finnish ways of life, and believed in conspiracy theories backing up these views (see quote 9).

Q8: "A child questions Western thinking and clearly considers his/her own culture as the superior one. This type of extremist thinking emerges especially in situations of conflict mediation – a female teacher is not to be respected".

Q9: "[I had] a conversation with one student. (…) The student showed disbelief towards the national media and an open, trust-based democratic society and its functioning. Instead, s/he had a lot of confidence in fake news and all kinds of conspiracy theories".

Conflicts related to cultures, ethnicities, and worldviews were reported to create major tensions in classrooms and to reinforce the "us versus them" thought constructs among the students. According to the respondents, the "us" mostly comprised the students' own ingroup (cultural/ethnic/religious), in some cases referring to immigrants in general, in contrast to "them", i.e., the "native Finns". However, according to some educators, conflicts do not only occur between Finnish students and students with foreign backgrounds but also between different minority groups. For example, confrontations between different religious interpretations were reported:

Q10: "Students argue verbally and physically about whether the other one has practised their religion correctly. Those who are not of the same faith are more likely to be held guilty when settling fights".

Some educators saw certain *cultural* groups as more prone to radicalisation than others; however, some admitted that these can include Finnish families as well:

Q11: "However, even in primary school, there are some students who consider violence to be justified. There are many background factors involved: A child may come from a culture where radicalised violence is common, and parents may accept violence. These families can also be Finns".

As a manifestation of presumed VRE, educators also reported intolerance and conflicts related to gender or sexual orientation, especially sexual minorities and the female gender. These included expressions of disrespect and despise, avoidance, rough physical contacts, insults, and belittling:

Q12: "I face offensive language, sexual insults, and aggressive resistance almost daily in teaching situations. Racist comments are common: native student targets these towards students from different ethnic backgrounds, or sometimes older African boys (may I say so?) have disrespected the female teachers and the girl students".

Sexuality as a topic, in general, was reported to cause tensions in classrooms. One educator described that a colleague was threatened with violence when s/he showed in a classroom a video that included footage of a kissing couple. Also, issues related to religious purity and male superiority were mentioned:

Q13: "A cartoon drawing had appeared on the wall of the girls' toilet, in which the immigrant men stabbed a naked immigrant woman with the text: 'This is what happens when you marry an infidel'".

Also, conflicts related to the concepts of honour and revenge were mentioned (see quote 14), and some respondents argued that these are issues that "[native] *Finns have problems understanding*".

Q14: "Once, two students had a violent fight (...). These students represented tribes/different denominations that hated each other and who could not, in their own words, under any circumstances, be friends. In addition, I would like to mention the concept of revenge, which Finns have problems understanding. In other words, if, for example, someone's family is insulted, the matter cannot be resolved with an apology, but it must be revenged. So, there is a fair number of conflicts".

Some educators produced arguments – although based on hearsay – that they had come to know that "*in some cultures, violence is acceptable if one insults the other's mother in a derogatory manner*". Educators also brought up that students may provoke each other to fight by insulting family members of the students in question:

Q15: "Manifestations of violent extremism have mainly included fights between students, using e.g., fists and kicks. These fights are usually related to the family background of multicultural students: insulting the family or their religious orientation".

The data also consisted of various accounts where random types of challenges with students were associated with VRE. The unifying factor between these depictions was the student's alleged membership in a minority group, for example, based on their ethnicity, special needs, neuropsychiatric challenges, or life situation:

Q16: "The city has placed children who have been taken into custody in our school,but they are from Finnish families (...). Snuff and other vices that these kids bring with them to school are a new problem here in our town. So are the lack of discipline and the indifferent attitude. Roma children find it sometimes difficult to adjust to our school. Not all of them, though. So, there is racism, yes.".

Ideological manifestations

This category refers to educators' speculations that a student of theirs had adopted an extremist ideology or admired one. Educators described, for example, instances in which a student had shown admiration for an extremist ideology or when a student had expressed admiration towards violent perpetrators, terrorist groups or violent attacks. These instances were typically related to students expressing pejorative gestures, hate speech, threats of violence, Nazi "greetings", Holocaust denial, racist or extremist symbols, watching Hitler-related videos, or listening to the music associated with the far-right. The

common factor in the "ideologies" students were thought to have adopted was a clear positioning between ingroups and outgroups:

> Q17: "A few adolescents have justified their violent behaviour by saying that students with an immigrant background must be beaten as they are less worthy than the others".

Educators reported that "ethnonationalistically"-oriented students (see quote 18) glorified violence as a solution to reduce immigration, suggested to "*close the borders*" and Muslims to be "*sent away*".

> Q18: "A student asked me during a lesson 'Why are foreigners allowed to come to Finland? I think that everyone who does not speak Finnish as their mother tongue must be kicked out of Finland. Finland belongs to the Finns only'. [Another] student said during recess: 'I could send all Muslims away; they just bully us and eat our food. It is good that they have been sent away from Finland'".

Some respondents seemed to disregard violent behaviour as a manifestation of VRE if they assumed that religion was not part of the conflict (see quotes 19 and 20). By underlining this, they indirectly indicated intuitively connecting VRE with religion.

> Q19: "I have, for example, heard that [students consider] the use of violence to be ok. [I have also] witnessed concrete kicking and beating. However, religion was in no way associated with these incidents".

> Q20: "[Some students'] violence has been directed at other students – not towards any religious denomination".

Several educators reported that their students had expressed admiration or sympathy towards the objectives of certain terrorists or extremist movements, accepted violent attacks in the name of an extremist ideology or openly celebrated some violent terrorist attacks (see quotes 21–23). Some educators, however, assumed that most of these students merely "flirted with violence for fun" or were not being "serious" when showing admiration towards the Nazis or ISIS, for example.

> Q21: "It has mainly been about glorifying terrorism or extremist organisations in the students' own (or their parents') country of origin. They have glorified, for example, the death of suicide bombers, which has sparked debate".

> Q22: "Shouting slogans of suicide bombers, celebrating 9/11".

> Q23: "While the 2008 school shooting [in Finland] happened, there was one enthusiastic student who was running from one class to another to report on the situation in real time".

Some educators reported having observed students with ideas that school shootings/school attacks were legitimate acts of revenge because of the perpetrators' experiences of school bullying. Students' interest in school shootings had been revealed in

their essay writings (quote 24), internet searches, face-to-face discussions or by carrying pictures of school shooters on their phones.[4]

> Q24: "One student wrote to his/her tutor teacher that his/her worldview is becoming closer and closer to the worldviews of the well-known school shooter".

There were also some concerning accounts about students whose radicalisation had escalated:

> Q25: "There is a student in my group who has adopted a neo-Nazi ideology. (…) The student stays in my class after each lesson wanting to talk to me about his/her thoughts, trying to defend his/her views and criticising the worldview taught in the school. The basic pillars of this student's thinking are based on ideas that the European race is a genetically cohesive mass and fears that mixing with immigrants will destroy the European race. He denies the Holocaust and thinks that females exist solely to give birth".

4.2.2 Behavioural manifestations of presumed violent radicalisation and extremism

In the analysis of educators' experiences of presumed manifestations of VRE, four subgroups of *behavioural* manifestations were found, namely 1) physical violence 2) intimidation with violence, 3) other types of asocial/harmful behaviour and 4) recruitment attempts (see Figure 1). Cognitive manifestations of presumed VRE, presented above, far outnumbered the behavioural manifestations of presumed VRE in Finnish educators' depictions.

Physical violence and intimidation with violence

The most typical behavioural manifestations that the educators associated with VRE were related to students using violence or intimidating others with violence, even if no ideological arguments were apparent. Although some educators acknowledged that violence was to do with a student's special needs (see quote 26), such as ADHD, hypersensitivity, or autism, they still reported it as a manifestation of VRE. Even students' self-destruction was in some cases considered to be a manifestation of behavioural VRE.

> Q26: "A student with special needs becomes violent when he/she gets nervous and requires physical restraint".

Many kinds of physical conflicts, especially between non-Finnish students, were straightforwardly associated with VRE, even in cases where young pupils were fighting in the playground because of a disagreement during recess:

> Q27: "Two children who have moved to Finland from abroad were arguing in the playground about who is allowed to go on the climbing frame first. One pushes the other down from the climbing frame, then the other kicks him/her back".

Violence as a means to resolve conflicts was mentioned several times as a manifestation of VRE (see quotes 28 and 29). Respondents described that some students settled disputes by "hitting and kicking" or "through violence" and that violence frequently followed disappointments.

Q28: "For very many of our students, violence is an accepted (and effective) way to deal with conflicts".

Q29: "The line between right and wrong is blurred. Fists and kicks are used to solve conflicts, and they may even threaten with mass fights".

Educators were concerned about students who expressed no remorse after using violence. They were also worried about the possible transfer effect of violent online games or media content on the students' behaviours. One respondent talked about a student who had drawn a caricature of the teacher being killed in the classroom.

The data revealed few cases in which a student was found carrying weapons or had threatened to conduct a school shooting, most often as an act of revenge for being bullied at school. In some cases, the severity of the situations led to police intervention. Educators also brought up their concerns related to the phenomenon of "*angry young men*":

Q30: "The phenomenon of 'angry young men': socially isolated young people who have experienced alienation for one reason or another and who have found social contacts from social media, whose narratives support the grandiose takeover of the world and a kind of a superhuman cult".

Other types of asocial/harmful behaviour

Respondents also described other types of asocial and challenging behaviours that they associated with VRE. These included, for example, bullying, substance abuse, stealing, malevolent provocation or gang formation (quote 31). Joining a gang was seen as an initial step "towards radicalisation".

Q31: "I have read students' papers and also heard talk that a couple of our immigrant students have conducted acts of violence, abused substances, committed a robbery and behaved contemptuously towards women".

Recruitment attempts

Within all the data, there were two depictions in which the educators described having witnessed actual extremism/terrorism-related recruitment attempts in EIs (see quotes 32 and 33). In addition to these depictions, educators talked about violence-inciting messages that had been found on the students' phones.

Q32: "I've met secondary school students from the Middle East who have been approached by a man a few years older than them with the same background, pretending to be their friend, indoctrinating them with extremist thoughts and

encouraging them to produce extremist ideas themselves. This happened clearly for recruitment purposes".

Q33: "In our school district, some students (with an immigrant background) praised the great life of the ISIS fighters – probably trying to recruit new warriors".[5]

5   DISCUSSION

Through an online survey, this study set to explore Finnish educators' *subjective perceptions* of the prevalence and manifestations of VRE among their students in EIs, and thus, indirectly, their *understanding* and *intuitive responses* about themes related to VRE. The findings are of special interest for the authorities dealing with P/CVE, for the development of preservice teacher training and for the educators whose daily interactions with students offer both planned and impromptu occasions to discuss themes related to ideology, activism, extremism, and terrorism.

Based on our findings, a relatively large proportion of the 1149 educators who answered the survey, indicated having witnessed presumed manifestations of extremist beliefs/thoughts (19%) among their students, or violently radicalised students (13%). The analysis yielded that female educators reported relatively more experiences with VRE than male educators, educators working in basic education reported more experiences than those at other levels of education, educators working in Finnish-speaking EIs reported considerably more instances than educators working in Swedish-speaking EIs, and educators in large municipalities (>100000) reported proportionately higher numbers of VRE related experiences than educators from smaller municipalities (<100000).

Most observations of presumed manifestations of VRE made by the educators fell under the theme of "cognitive" manifestations of VRE, which included pro-violence attitudes, conflicts related to cultures and worldviews, and ideological expressions of VRE among the students. Typical examples of these were students showing hostile, racist, xenophobic, narrow-minded, or intolerant attitudes that the educators interpreted as signs of VRE. These also included students presenting critique towards the "status quo" of the Finnish society or the Western world, or admiration of certain extremist/terrorist perpetrators or organisations. The second theme that emerged in the analysis was entitled "behavioural" manifestations of VRE, which typically included accounts of students who had behaved asocially, violently or threatened others with violence, and cases in which the educators had witnessed presumed attempts to recruit students into extremist activities.

It is important to note that the findings do not reflect an accurate prevalence of VRE in Finnish EIs but can instead be viewed as a manifestation of educators' VRE-related *intuitive responses*, as well as a projection of the educators' current understanding of these themes. While the data included some accounts that clearly included extremist features (e.g., quote 26), we argue that Finnish educators seem to have some difficulties in distinguishing VRE from other types of motives or reasons behind challenging behaviours and conflicts, and hostile or provoking rhetoric among the students.

Considering the number of references to students that somehow differ from what is considered "a normative student" in Finland, i.e., white, Finnish speaker, secular Lutheran, and able-bodied (Niemi et al., 2018), the analysis also established that educators seemed to interpret hostile attitudes, conflicts, and acts of violence as a sign of VRE especially if students from societal minority groups were involved. This was often the case even when no ideological features were clearly expressed. Based on the data, these students were typically from ethnic or religious minorities, or had special educational needs and/or neuropsychiatric/cognitive challenges. This is an important finding, as, at the same time, hostilities, or manifestations of VRE expressed by some other students may have been downplayed or thought to stem from other motives than VRE. The finding shows that also in the Finnish educational context, there is a risk for students from minority groups to become stigmatised and viewed as "at risk of radicalisation" because educators may view them as different and have biased preconceptions of diversities (see e.g., Christodoulou, 2020; Christodoulou & Szakács, 2018).

The Finnish educators' *intuitive responses* in terms of student profiles associated with VRE also seem to reflect the way extremists and terrorism are typically portrayed in the Finnish media as a threat that is coming from outside of Finland (Malkki & Sallamaa, 2018). Concurrently, as demonstrated by the recent case of far-right terrorism suspicion (see e.g., Finnish police, 2021; Finnish Security Intelligence Service 2018; 2020), the normalisation of hostile rhetoric regarding minorities have been reported in Finland at large, (YLE, 2021)[6]. It is also worth noting that as Finnish educators have not been systematically trained on themes related to VRE, it is reasonable to assume that their VRE-related knowledge - as well as those of Finnish citizens in general - is largely originating from the media (Malkki et al., 2021, see also Heath-Kelly, 2017) and public debates.

It is probable that some of the cases described by the educators do epitomise extremist features in students and that they do have an accurate understanding of VRE-related themes. However, in the light of research and official reports on violent extremism in Finland (e.g. Malkki & Sallamaa, 2018; Ministry of the Interior, 2018), the percentages indicate that up to 13-19% of Finnish educators had encountered manifestations of cognitive or behavioural VRE in the context of their work seem unreasonably large. It may well be that the educators interpret intentional provocation, defiance and aggressivity as signs of VRE. Yet these behaviours may stem from many different reasons and be related to the storms of adolescence (see e.g., Sieckelinck et al., 2015). Indeed, one obvious challenge that arises from our findings, and one that is recognised by previous research, is the risk of false alarms and over-reporting and the impact that these can have on individual students. If a student is viewed as "risky", "radicalised" or worse, an "extremist" without any established connection to extremist ideologies or groups, this is likely to cause frustration and anger and create grievances in the student. This type of labelling may also drive a "self-fulfilling prognosis" when a student starts to behave according to the labels s/he is given from the outside (Appiah, 2005). On a broader scale, false labelling increases existing prejudices and discrimination in society and undermines societal harmony.

Therefore, as Parker et al. (2021, p. 649) have highlighted, training educators on PVE-E is necessary and "should focus on explaining what radicalisation may look like as well as what it does not to avoid over-reporting of non-concerning cases". To nurture and foster social harmony and address the tangible issue of racism in Finland (e.g., FRA, 2019; Zacheus et al., 2019), we conclude that this type of awareness-raising among all citizens would be needed in Finnish society.

Overall, our study is in line with previous studies highlighting the many challenges related to the relatively novel PVE-E duties (Davies, 2016; Ghosh et al., 2017; Harris-Hogan et al., 2019; Heath-Kelly, 2017; Mattsson & Säljö, 2018; Parker et al., 2021; Sieckelinck et al., 2015; Sjøen, 2021). Based on our findings, it is especially significant to consider how the educators' understanding of VRE and their intuitive responses related to these themes affect the way they can implement the national PVE-E policies within their classrooms. We argue that simply increasing the educators' science-based knowledge of VRE-related themes is not sufficient. As the PVE-E duties touch upon delicate and private matters relating to identity, worldviews, viewpoint diversity, and the freedom of expression, added sensitivity from those implementing these duties is required. All in-service training and pre-service teacher education must be therefore accompanied, and preferably preceded by thorough self-reflection upon one's preconceptions, worldviews, values, and intuitive responses as these may obstruct social justice and equality in education (see also Benjamin et al., 2021b).

We acknowledge the possible skewness of the survey data due to the particularity of the topic area. It is possible that responding felt more appealing to those educators who have encountered VRE in their work or who are generally interested or worried about the themes related to VRE. The educators who decided to respond to the survey may also have felt pressure to answer something to the questions and thus forced themselves to report even the smallest suspicions they may have had. Also, we acknowledge that as respondents' VRE-related foreknowledge was not assessed, the national definitions of "violent radicalisation" and "extremism" given at the beginning of the survey (Ministry of the Interior, 2020) may have increased the skewness of the interpretations of the respondents. Further, the data gathered in the context of this study cannot be considered a reliable indicator of what kinds of manifestations of VRE Finnish educators would report to, for example, the police or other security authorities as the threshold to report observations in an anonymous survey is obviously lower than when reporting observations directly to the police or other security authorities. However, in this study, educators' possible referrals of students causing concerns about radicalisation were not investigated. The limitations of data collection by online surveys are particularly pronounced in situations where it would be advantageous to be able to ask for clarifications on the respondents' answers. The most significant limitation of the study is that by using survey data, there is no way of knowing what kinds of instances and manifestations of VRE educators leave unreported or that they have ignored altogether. Therefore, methods utilising, for example, participatory ethnography or in-depth

interviews should be exploited in future studies. An ethnographic study design would also enable observations of educators' real responses and actions, for example, after instances in which extremist views are expressed in classrooms.

6   CONCLUSIONS

The merging intersection of formal education and governmental policies related to the PVE-E requires more knowledge about how educators – the ones who are supposed to implement these policies – understand and experience issues concerning radicalisation and violent extremism. In this study, we presented a critical examination of Finnish educators' understanding of themes related to VRE by studying their subjective perceptions about the prevalence and manifestations of VRE among their students in EIs. The here-presented examination is timely, as in 2019 Finland published its third National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2020), which, for the first time, included a separate chapter dedicated to the education sector, outlining the guidelines for Finnish PVE-E. Despite the education sector's major role in the Finnish national P/CVE policies, educators' VRE-related knowledge or competencies have not yet been studied nor developed accordingly. By exploring Finnish educators' experiences of VRE among their students, and through this, evaluating their understanding of VRE, this study contributes to filling this notable gap.

Based on our findings, it can be concluded that Finnish educators do confront ideologically and morally challenging situations in the context of their work, some of which include extremist features. However, educators seem to have notable difficulties in distinguishing VRE from other types of motives for hostile rhetoric or behaviour, especially if students from societal minority groups are involved. Our findings confirm the results of previous studies highlighting the challenges related to the mission of PVE-E and the need to train educators in matters related to VRE. However, we also underline that ethical and socially just implementation of PVE policies in and through education requires and must be accompanied by research-based in-service training for educators that focuses not only on VRE-related knowledge but also on self-reflection, i.e., the ability to evaluate one's preconceptions and intuitive responses in terms of VRE. Furthermore, we believe that this type of self-reflection could be beneficial for all citizens in Finnish society.

In addition to our findings on Finnish educators' understanding of VRE, our study also demonstrates the extent to which educators face provocative, hostile, or unorthodox attitudes, status-quo-critical opinions, and worldview and identity-related conflicts among their students in educational institutions. As societies are becoming more and more versatile and the students' worldviews, identities and sources of knowledge are rapidly diversifying, the need to support educators in dealing with these topics and the tensions they create, becomes urgent.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For example, in UK, extremism is defined in the Prevent strategy as: "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (e.g. Ragazzi, 2017).

[2] According to these definitions: "Violent radicalisation is a process through which individuals end up using or threatening the use of violence, urging someone to commit acts of violence or justifying it on ideological grounds". "Violent extremism refers to using, threatening with, instigating, encouraging or justifying violence based on ideological grounds" (Ministry of the Interior 2020).

[3] The national languages defined by the Finnish Constitution are Finnish and Swedish. In addition, the law also protects the right of Sámi, Roma and sign language speakers to use their own language. In the time of data gathering (2018), there were 2593 Finnish speaking EIs, and 270 Swedish speaking EIs in Finland providing basic, general upper secondary or vocational education.

[4] In the Finnish context, the most notable actions of targeted violence in the 2000s were the Columbine-inspired school shootings in 2007 and 2008, in which perpetrators have left behind writings and images implying that these attacks had a political message (see Kiilakoski & Oksanen 2011; Malkki 2014). There have also been several smaller-scale attacks in Finnish schools, most recently in October 2019. Several plans for similar school shootings have been uncovered, and the number of school threats after school shootings has been noteworthy (e.g. Lindberg, Oksanen, Sailas & Kaltiala-Heino 2012). Therefore, from the very first Action Plan 2012 onwards, Finnish P/CVE policies have targeted all forms of violent extremism – including school shootings.

[5] A comparatively high percentage of Finns, altogether over 80 people, have been reported to left to the conflict area of Syria and Iraq (Finnish Security Intelligence Service, 2018).

[6] The Finnish Security Intelligence Service stated in their national security review (2020) that the danger of right-wing extremism and terrorism has grown in Finland. It was only in December 2021 that Finnish police said that they were investigating a widespread criminal skein and had detained five people who were suspected of terrorist offences. The ideological affiliation of the suspected ones is said to be related with the far-right ideology, more specifically to accelerationism (Finnish Police, 2021). What was noteworthy in the latter, is that although the neo-Nazi attitudes and immigrant-hostile actions of these young people were known by both the authorities and the locals, they were able to carry on their activities, and their behaviours were even normalised with a "boys will be boys" attitude by some of the local people (YLE, 2021; Helsinki Times, 2021).

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