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Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden  
2021

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Kuusisto , A , Gearon , L , Benjamin , S & Koirikivi , P 2021 , Re-conceptualising radicalization: The Educational Research Context of Counter-Extremism through the Prism of Worldviews and Value Learning . in E Aslan & M Hermansen (eds) , Religious Diversity at School : Educating for New Pluralistic Contexts . Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung , p y Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden , Wiesbaden , pp. 123 137 . [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9_8)

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/342676>

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9_8)

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*(Submitted final)*

Please cite as: Kuusisto A., Gearon L.F., Benjamin S., Koirikivi P-M. (2021) Re-Conceptualizing Radicalization: The Educational Research Context of Counter-Extremism Through the Prism of Worldviews and Value Learning. In: Aslan E., Hermansen M. (eds) *Religious Diversity at School: Educating for New Pluralistic Contexts*. Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung. Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 123-137. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31696-9_8)

## **Re-conceptualising Radicalisation: The Educational Research Context of Counter-Extremism through the Prism of Worldviews and Value Learning**

**Arniika Kuusisto, Liam Gearon, Saija Benjamin, Pia Koirikivi**

### Abstract

This chapter reconceptualises current and much vaunted notions of extremism and radicalisation within the context of a broad cross-disciplinary research literature and a diverse range of counter-extremism political policy across nation states worldwide. Where intense policy and research interest in ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ has intensified rapidly over recent years, resultant research findings and national/ international policies often conjointly highlight the importance of the educational contexts of youth in simultaneously detecting risks towards radicalisation and preventing ideological extremism, along with its (rarer) manifestation in terroristic violence. What tends to be lacking, however, in both research and policy contests is sustained critical attention to the perspectives of youths’ own views on these matters. Drawing on our current (2018-2023) empirical research project funded by the Academy of Finland, our chapter makes a distinctive contribution to the research literature on radicalisation by presenting historical-contemporary analysis and current empirical findings on the context of extremism through the prism of worldviews and value-learning. A particular feature of this contribution is the advancement of a life trajectory model of ‘Value Learning Trajectories’ (Kuusisto & Gearon, 2017a), and a reconceptualisation of radicalisation within what the broader frame of a human-rights-centred ‘spectrum of value’.

### Keywords:

Education; prevention of violent extremism; radicalisation; value learning; life trajectory, resilience

## Introduction

Research interest in ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ has intensified rapidly over recent years. Although both international research findings and national policies often point towards the importance of the educational contexts of youth in the work towards both detecting risks and prevention, what is critically lacking are the perspectives of educational research and youths’ own views on these matters. Furthermore, although there are theoretical, quantitative, and qualitative contributions to this, most previous work has not even tried to merge these in genuine Mixed Methods designs. Additionally, even if ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ are at the very core connected with ideologies, worldviews, and religions, most studies would approach the issue with a limited understanding on personal worldviews, values, and religiosity. Finally, many studies as well as national policies have previously focused on ‘putting off the fires’ through the intent to locating ‘at risk individuals’ through profiling, even in educational institutions, and reporting on them onwards, rather than addressing the whole age group with the intention of supporting the well-being and integration of age cohorts.

Our on-going research project “Growing up radical? The role of educational institutions in guiding young people’s worldview construction” contributes towards filling these critical gaps in the literature, at both the levels of research and policy. The project is funded by the Academy of Finland (2018-2023, no. 315860), and is carried out at the Stockholm (PI Kuusisto), Helsinki (Benjamin, Koirikivi), and Oxford (Gearon) universities.

One of our starting points, apart from the above-mentioned gaps, was that the concepts in these studies are often utilised in fuzzy and undefined ways, lacking a clear understanding of what ‘radical’, ‘extreme’, or other related notions such as ‘activism’ even stand for. A major hub for policy-makers, scholars, researchers and policy makers, *Radicalisation Research*, suggests that the term ‘radicalisation’ has ‘often seemed the key to understanding, and preventing, modern terrorism’, providing through its site a wealth of accessible high-quality empirical data on the modern phenomenon of extremist ideologies and terrorist actions and motivations in societal and political context, and through multiple disciplinary lenses (Radicalisation Research, 2020). As Gearon (2018) has highlighted in his review of terrorism and counter-terrorism policy, there are very few academic disciplines that have not been directly impacted by academic attention dedicated in response to national and global policies of geopolitical and security contexts, largely but not exclusively initiated after the fulcrum point

of 9/11, along with the wars, the terrorism, and counter-terrorism policy which followed swiftly in its wake.

Our research has been cognizant, however, of the multiplicity of the historical precedence for such notions of the extreme in political and religious ideological contexts. Hobsbawm's (2004) 'short twentieth century', for instance, is defined—prior to 9/11—as the 'age of extremes'. Here the literature on autocracy, dictatorship and totalitarianism (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1967) should remind us all, that the majority of those extreme political movements in the twentieth century were of political rather than religious origins. In geopolitical and security terms, it was nevertheless 9/11 that geopolitically defined the twentieth-first century as what we might term 'the age of terror'. In this context, then, a range of disciplinary frames are drawn to address a real societal and geopolitical problem. Political and social science scholarship has tended, for obvious reasons, to dominate much of the debate. In macro-political terms, we think here for instance of two generalised theses. First of all, that of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) *End of History*—which lauded after the Cold War, somewhat hubristically, the end of all ideological struggle and the triumph of liberal democracy. And secondly, Samuel's Huntington's (1994) *Clash of Civilizations* which was a direct retort to his former student at Harvard. Huntington famously challenged the notion of the 'end of history' by saying (pre-9/11) that future global struggles would be, yes, defined less by ideology, but would be just as intense forms of conflict; albeit ones that would be rooted in cultural identity and religion.

One of the major implications of this geopolitical context is the emergence of security as an aspect of many facets of public policy; in Europe, for example, in the *European Agenda on Security* (EAS, 2015). In this regard, for good or ill, education across all phases has come to play a very significant part in counter-extremism, in deradicalization, in counter-terrorism, as Ghosh, Manuel, Chan, Dilimulati and Babaei's (2016) international review of the literature attests. There are now indeed plenty of studies which empirically examine educational reaction to public policy counter-terrorism initiatives (see chapter references).

Our project takes a more holistic approach by examining the notions of the extreme and the radical as part of values development and the construction of individual identities, and, critically, we think, 'worldview'. We are also interested, while cognizant of macro level historical, political, and related discussions, of the actual lived experience of young people, and how their view of the world is shaped and defined in relation to the personal and social, cultural, political and even existential, philosophical or theological perspectives that are available to them both online and offline, globally and locally. Particularly interesting contexts to examine

this through research are educational institutions and the opportunities these offer as value transmitting contexts and spaces wherein entire youth cohorts interact and encounter diverse worldviews and ideologies on a daily basis under adult supervision. There is indeed an evident lack of research in the field that would provide an empirical perspective on young people's worldview and attitudinal development trajectories with an educational approach. The present study contributes towards filling this particular lacuna.

*Worldview* here refers to a mental framework within which individuals interpret the nature of reality and the nature and purpose of human life, evaluate what is good and what is evil, and how one should live (Vidal 2008). A personal worldview is an individual's unique ontological, epistemological, and ethical orientation to their environment (Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010), ontological foundation for values, beliefs and knowledge used in meaning-making and making choices (Poulter 2013). It functions as a philosophy of life, which plays a critical role in understanding reality and in providing satisfying meanings to life's questions. As a notion, worldview can also refer to group values and epistemologies, functioning to define understandings of what can be known and how to construct ideas of oneself and 'the other' (Poulter et al. 2016, 68). Previous research shows that children and youths' worldviews are increasingly hybrid, merging elements from different traditions or perspectives, such as the religious and the secular (Helve 2016), new spirituality (Utriainen & Ramstedt, 2017), media, fairy tales, media, and computer games (Kuusisto, *forthcoming*). Worldview is shaped by and intertwined in one's lived experiences, self-understandings and sense of belonging. By 'radical' we refer to a perspective, whereby an individual adopts an extremist belief system or an ideology whose rationale becomes a way of life and a framework for meaningful action for that individual (*Centre for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence*, 2017).

Radical thinking is not in itself problematic, but most often a natural process for adolescents questioning the worldviews of their elders or the societal status-quo (e.g. Freire 1970). However, if radical thoughts lead to violent actions and criminal behaviour, it presents a risk for both the individual's development and for the cohesion of the society. It is noteworthy that in the context of this study, 'radical' is used as a participant-derived term to describe one's personal worldview, rather than it being based on researchers' categorizations.

As extremism and radicalization, especially the work where actors of radical violence have been profiled, are often combined with continuous experiences of social exclusion and bullying, it is important to consider this factor when looking into the ways in which schools could support young people's wellbeing and resilience. A previous international study on children's perceptions of bullying in multicultural schools in Estonia, Finland and Sweden

(Schihaleyev, Kuusisto, Vikdahl, Kallioniemi 2019) in age groups 9-10, 12-13, 15-16 (N= 2781) illustrated that approximately half of the students had been frequently or occasionally bullied. The reasons for bullying were often attributed to visible external features, such as physical appearance or clothing, but also to bullied students' choice of friends and language use. The most vulnerable to bullying were children and youth of immigrant backgrounds, those who spoke other than the majority language at home, or who have been raised in more religiously observant families. (Schihaleyev et al., 2019.)

### **Worldview and Value Learning**

Our current research builds on prior theoretical, methodological and contextual work on value learning in the life trajectory (e.g. Kuusisto & Gearon 2017a; 2017b). Some of our previous work setting the foundation for the “Growing up radical?” research project are based on our earlier findings on young people’s experiences on religious minority socialization, their religious social identity and community social capital, and their negotiations of values and memberships across social contexts (Kuusisto 2011). Furthermore, when examining value learning and teaching, the perspective of parents (Kuusisto 2013) and professional educators, such as their professional value choices (Kuusisto & Gearon 2017b; Gearon & Kuusisto 2020) and teachers’ approach to pluralism (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012) become critical, as does, then, the role of teacher education and the development of student teachers’ intercultural & interreligious sensitivity (Kuusisto et al 2015; Rissanen et al 2016). Our previous work takes perspectives, thereby, in both the societal educational contexts of schools and early learning, and the religious communities, where the role of religious leaders and their authority in education and political theology (Gearon & Kuusisto 2018), play a key role. Finally, the scholars, researchers, and teacher educators (Kuusisto & Gearon 2017b; 2019), as well as the teachers of religious education (Luodeslampi & Kuusisto 2017; Luodeslampi, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2019) hold key positions in problematising, examining, formulating, and implementing the aims of education on religions and worldviews.

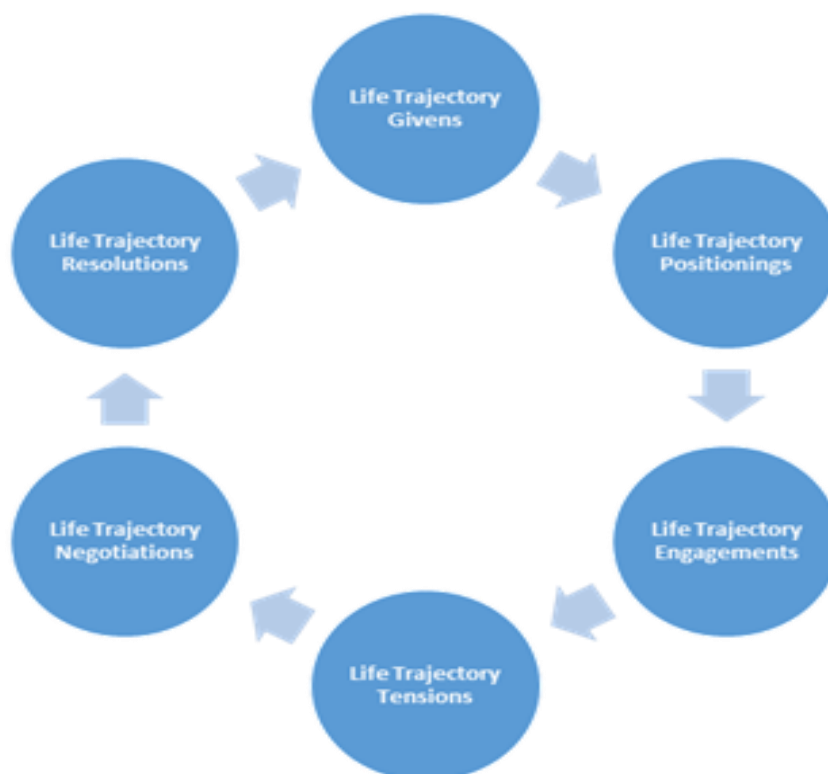


Figure 1. Value Learning along the Life Trajectory (Kuusisto & Gearon 2017a)

Teaching and learning values is a complex process of (re)negotiation-in-context. In our *Value Learning Trajectories: Theory, Method, Context* (Kuusisto & Gearon, eds., 2017a), we have, on the basis of both theoretical literature and empirical findings, proposed a model for Value Learning Trajectories, with six stages: Life Trajectory Givens, Life Trajectory Positionings, Life Trajectory Engagements, Life Trajectory Tensions, Life Trajectory Negotiations, and Life Trajectory Resolutions. These, together with our notion of ‘spectrum of value’ also illustrate how what is perceived as ‘extreme’ in a particular setting is context-specific: each society holds its particular socio-historical and political framing which has been constructed over time. In the following section, we will contextualise this societal context as regards our own, presently on-going research project. (Kuusisto & Gearon 2017a.)

## Contextualisation of societal polarisation and violent extremism in Finland

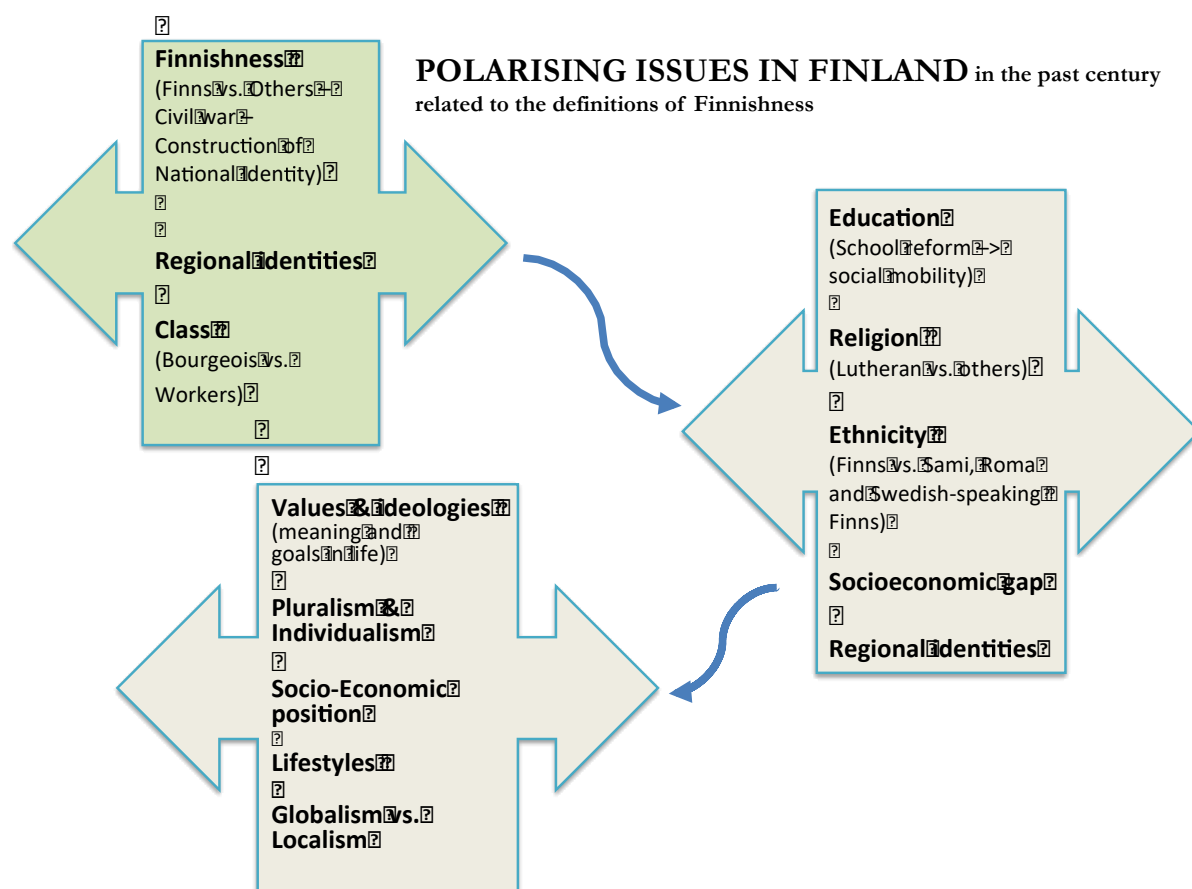


Figure 2. The gradual change in polarising issues in Finland (Benjamin & Koirikivi, 2019)

Societal polarisation is not a new phenomenon in Finland. In fact, there have been strong societal divisions in the Finnish society that have caused tensions and violence both within Finland and in relation to its neighboring countries. However, the core elements constituting polarisation have changed from the beginning of the last century to the present-day realities (see Figure 2). In a rough outline Finland has since its time of independence (1917 onwards) moved from a society closely tied to cross-generational, static social classes to the contemporary situation, where the society is supposed to offer equal possibilities for all citizens, but with a strong emphasis on individuality. A central phase is the construction of the welfare state in the 1960s and the educational reform of the 1970s that created an educational system that aimed to provide equal educational opportunities for all thereby fueling people's social mobility. Today, the most burning polarisation of attitudes can be seen to take place at the level of opinions, values, ideologies, and lifestyles that are viewed as personal, free choices.



Following its European neighbors, Finland is facing increasing pluralism, which poses new challenges for the traditional definitions of Finnishness with its values, worldviews, and lifestyles (Casanova, 2009). In brief, the emphasis is on individuality and free life choices, but within a tight framework defined by the traditional perceptions of Finnishness that are reflected, for example, in political debates about national identity and immigration (see e.g. Niemi, Kallioniemi, & Ghosh, 2019). These developments together with the rise of violent events and ideologies abroad, but also in Finland, have created pressure for education to address these challenges by developing the students' abilities to live and thrive in diversifying societal settings and in the globalized reality while becoming active and democratic (national) citizens.

In the current societal situation where national, political, and secular identities often seem to vie with cultural ethnic and religious identities in a contested “public sphere” (Habermas, 2006), the examination of young people’s worldview development is particularly timely. It is important to pay attention to the role of educational institutions as value transmitting contexts, as the schools’ curricula, ethos, and the peer communities are important elements outlining young people’s worldviews and everyday lives (Benjamin, 2017). Unlike countries such as France and the UK, Finnish schools and universities are not following any strict and abiding anti-radicalisation or counter terrorism programs and practices (Niemi, Benjamin, Kuusisto & Gearon, 2018), but the novel guidelines regarding the ethos and contents of prevention in the education sector are outlined in the most recent National Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremism (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2020).

As pointed out in the above named Plan’s section for the Education sector, written by doctoral researcher Katja Vallinkoski and the post-doctoral researchers Saija Benjamin and Pia Koirikivi from the “Growing up radical?” research project in collaboration with the Finnish National Board of Education (Ministry of the Interior, 2020), the work carried out in early prevention should focus on strengthening the students’ psychological resilience, wellbeing, and inclusion that support social cohesion and acceptance of diversity. Likewise, it is central to address any hateful and violent attitudes on the part of students and to prevent these from being silently accepted and gradually normalised. In order to combat worldwide issues and challenges, cooperation and the capacity to work together are needed at the individual level, e.g. in school contexts (e.g. Niemi 2017), as well at global levels (OECD, 2016).

A central aim of Finnish basic education today is thus to support pupils' growth towards humane attitudes and ethically responsible membership in society while providing them with the knowledge and skills needed in life (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Indirectly, this ethos entails that all action, behaviors, and ideologies that violate this objective

are not accepted and need to be prevented. These include hate speech and all forms of racism that are on the rise and that fuel violent extremist movements and ideologies. Education has a central role in addressing and responding to these developments. However, the process of growing towards ethically responsible membership in society can take many forms. Education in a free, democratic country cannot start from the restriction of people's thinking or forming of opinions. Thus, even though the "prevention" of extremist thinking and actions is a popular goal set in many countries nowadays, there are at least four aspects that need to be considered when applying this objective in educational contexts:

1. First, an ideology means a normative collection of values and beliefs providing a window through which to see the world. Supporting an ideology needs to be separated from thinking, discussing, or learning about different ideologies. These are valuable educational objectives as such. Ideologies include guidance towards behaviors and action, but mere thinking *per se* cannot be penalised.
2. Second, the word "extremist" indicates a marginalised position on the periphery of normality. However, declaring an ideology extremist is dubious without a widely accepted, common understanding of what constitutes a mainstream ideology. It thus needs to be recognised that depicting something as an extremist ideology is always a political statement.
3. Third, supporting an ideology that deviates from the mainstream does not automatically imply that the individual or group aspires to see revolutionary changes in the society. One can live according to one's values and beliefs peacefully in parallel with the mainstream population even in situations where the values are notably different from each other. It needs to be asked how far the society is allowed to dictate individual minds and lifestyles.
4. Fourth, the concept of radical thinking has gained a negative connotation in many security policies. However, it is noteworthy that this construct is heavily related to time and space, and to the cultural and religious context where it is used. Thinking or ideology that are considered radical in one context may be totally mainstream in another society and vice versa. It is important to remember that without fervent supporters of "radical" ideologies, many forward-looking societal changes— today considered normative—would not have taken place.

In the framework of preventing violent extremism in the Finnish educational context, it is thus suggested that instead of aiming to prevent radical or extremist thinking, the focus should be on preventing and countering the formation of hostile attitudes (as thinking is in itself an important objective of education) and preventing violent actions (since education cannot be targeted primarily to the prevention of certain actions but it needs to approach the issue more widely). The focus on attitudes is important as attitudes refer to a set of emotions, beliefs, and

behaviors toward a particular object, person, thing, or event (Crano, Cooper, & Forgas, 2010; Allport, 1954). Attitudes may be positive or negative, but they are always loaded with evaluations and they are often the result of experience, upbringing, or exposure. As attitudes combine thinking with emotions, they can have a powerful influence over behavior. Even though education cannot dictate what types of values people can support as the foundations of their worldviews, education has the right and need to address speech and behavior that is harmful, hateful, or disrespectful towards others.

*Hostile attitudes* may manifest in children and youth, for example, in a simplified understanding about ethical issues, in black and white thinking, in the acceptance or promotion of prejudices, racism, and other types of discrimination, in the acceptance of the use of violence, or in the expressions of hate speech and/or violent behavior justified by an ideology. A central mission of basic education is therefore to prevent the proliferation of hostile attitudes by providing students with knowledge and critical thinking skills that enable them to recognise the complexities related to ethical issues, increase their understanding about different values and traditions, and support their identity formation both as individuals and members of various social groups.

### **Empirical outline for the “Growing up radical?” research project**

Within the societal and conceptual framework depicted above, the important question that remains open at the intersection of educational, psychological, and sociological knowledge is, what are the factors and mechanisms contributing to the individual’s worldview construction that may lead to peaceful relations with the societal status-quo, or to non-violent activism in order to advance one’s values, and in another case to frustration, hostility and even violent forms of radicalism. In order to provide answers to this question and to react to the increasingly tense atmosphere regarding the strengthening of national and religious identities and the radicalisation of youths in an increasingly pluralistic Europe, interdisciplinary, in-depth examination of youths’ worldview construction is needed.

Our on-going research project “Growing up radical?” (2018-2022) investigates young people's (ages 16-20) life trajectory and worldview development in the Finnish context. Special interest is in youth who identify strongly with a political or religious ideology or who otherwise hold a strong worldview that can be described as “radical” or even “extremist” on the basis of their strong commitment to certain values (see also Benjamin, Koirikivi, Kuusisto & Gearon, *forthcoming*). The study aims to deepen the understanding of the elements in young people’s

lives that have been significant in the development of their worldviews and, in certain cases, in the paths leading to fundamentalist or radical interpretations of values and lifestyles. Particular emphasis is given to educational institutions as growing-up contexts in the lives of children and young people. The mixed method data for the enquiry is gathered through a combination of an online survey (N=3617) and in-depth interviews (N=45) with youth studying at the upper secondary school level and residing in different parts of Finland. The study also includes data gained from the national matriculation exam on psychology that included a question about radicalisation in 2017. In assessing the students' views about the processes related to radicalisation, the project analysed the answers (n = 3337) produced for the question titled "Assessing Radicalization" (Benjamin, Koirikivi & Kuusisto, in press).

The project thus will shed new light on the role of educational institutions in the worldview development of young people, as well as in the prevention of violent extremism in and through education. The project approaches the phenomenon from the perspective of educational sciences, looking into both the contextual factors and the agentic influences in individual development, but takes a strongly interdisciplinary approach due to the nature of the topic. The approach holds strong ties to the sociology of education, as well as social psychology (e.g. Kruglanski et al. 2014; Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks & Winter, 2015) and, where relevant, the study of radicalisation, and cognate fields such as terrorism studies (Breen Smyth, 2007; Schmid, 2011). These aims are targeted by taking onto account the perspectives of the youths themselves in previously unexplored ways. The knowledge this study brings about the ways in which the youth construct their worldviews in relation to their family, school, and larger societal context is relevant for various societal actors, such as educational policy makers, teachers and other educators, youth workers, security and intelligence actors, and public policy. Investigating the ways in which young people affiliate with local and global communities is essential for understanding the process of radicalisation and for creating support systems that prevent the rise of violent conflicts.

### **Young people's views on educational institutions as places for preventing hostile attitudes**

The preliminary findings gained from the open questions in the on-line study (n=3617) present the viewpoints of Finnish upper secondary level students about how, in their opinion, education can prevent and reduce young people's prejudices and promote pro-social attitudes and actions (Koirikivi, Benjamin, Kuusisto, Gearon, forthcoming). The thematic content analysis of the responses show that the main concerns fueling students' prejudices towards other people are related especially to fears of physical or emotional insecurity and disturbances that

might be caused by different lifestyles and values (Koirikivi, Benjamin, Kuusisto, Gearon, forthcoming). Regarding the role of educational institutions in preventing the formation of hostile attitudes, the findings highlight that students think that schools need to be places where diversity and togetherness are not just mere objectives, but where these can be experienced directly on a daily basis. In the research data the young people argue that countering hostile attitudes and increasing understanding between people from different groups requires diverse, objective and unbiased knowledge received from a trusted source, such as a teacher.

Similar findings are gained from the matriculation exam data (Benjamin, Koirikivi, Kuusisto, in press) in which the young people's exam responses show that they strongly link prevention with broad-based support offered by the societal sectors, with a sense of community and with the development of various cognitive capacities. The responses emphasise school as an important cognitive and social growth environment that is seen to have an impact on the process of radicalisation. The results show that young people's ideas regarding the role of education in the prevention of radicalisation are similar to those outlined in the National Action Plan.

However, regardless of these findings that highlight the importance of knowledge, it is important to keep in mind that mere cognitive information is unlikely to suffice in creating the emotional responses needed to overcome imagined constructs about group boundaries (e.g. Batson, 2009; Demetriou, 2018; Ottati, Bodenhausen & Newman, 2005). Therefore, it is central to aim for educational endeavors that are regarded as personally relevant by the students (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). As studies have shown, only information and experiences that one deems intrinsically rewarding and relevant can be internalised and thus lead to actual changes in one's beliefs, and consequently, attitudes (Kelman 1958). To do this, a pedagogical setting is required where both cognitive and emotional learning is solicited. In the light of radicalisation and the rise of violent ideologies, the findings thus highlight the importance of developing student resilience through reflexive and critical thinking and knowledge acquisition, as well as by strengthening organisational practices that engage students in cooperation and learning with and through each other.

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