'What is this ISIS all about?' Addressing violent extremism with
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'What is this ISIS all about?' Addressing violent extremism with students: Finnish educators' perspectives

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, the prevention of violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism has become a major policy issue in Europe, and educational institutions' central role in it has become widely acknowledged. However, what has rarely been addressed is that living in today's media-centred world, in which terrorism receives much dramatic attention, news about violent extremist attacks reach every student and can significantly impact their emotions, beliefs, attitudes and feelings of safety. Since little attention has been given to how educators have addressed issues of violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism with their students, this study relies on data-driven content analysis to investigate Finnish educators' experiences regarding two issues in particular: first, what kind of themes associated with violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism have been brought up in classroom discussions? Second, what provided the impetus for these discussions? The discussions in educational institutions dealt with the motives behind ideologically motivated violence, extreme ideologies, security concerns, immigration and ethical considerations. Recent violent attacks, curriculum content, students' experiences and jokes requiring educators' intervention provided the impetus for such discussions. The study findings are important for developing educational approaches to address violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism-related issues in a pedagogically and ethically sustainable manner and to create 'safe spaces' for the discussions.

Keywords

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, countering terrorism and violent extremism has become a major policy issue across Europe. Policies and measures introduced to prevent attacks have not only intensified, but their scope has also become significantly broader (De Goede, 2008; Lehto, 2008; Malkki, 2016). Related to these developments, governments have put strong emphasis on the early prevention of violent radicalisation, and from the mid-2000s onwards, several Western European countries have developed national action plans for this purpose (Sedgwick, 2010; Sjøen and Mattsson, 2019). Many of these plans are based on the idea that preventing and countering violent extremism requires cooperation between a wide spectrum of different kinds of actors, including educators (e.g. Davies, 2018; Davies and Limbada, 2019; Durodié, 2016; Ghosh et al., 2017).

In some European countries, the increasingly stronger link between education and security policies has resulted in normative requirements for educators – which in turn have been strongly criticised by scholars (e.g. Aly et al., 2014; Davies and Limbada, 2019; Durodie, 2016; Faure-Walker, 2019; Jerome et al., 2019; Mattsson and Säljö, 2018; Taylor and Soni, 2017). For example, in the United Kingdom (UK) educators have a statutory duty to take action in situations where they consider 'fundamental British values' to be threatened (see e.g. Davies, 2009, 2016; Gearon, 2013; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Kundnani, 2009; O'Donnell, 2016; Quartermaine, 2016). In other contexts, such as Finland, the preventative role of educational institutions (EIs) has been less clear (Niemi et al., 2018).

However, whereas debates concerning the preventative role of education have received much scholarly attention of late (see e.g. Davies, 2014; Davies and Limbada, 2019; Davydov, 2015; Gearon, 2013; Ghosh et al., 2017; Sjøen and Jore, 2019), what has remained mostly overlooked is the fact that the increasing public attention directed towards terrorism has also other, more prevalent and general implications for education. Although few children and adolescents living in post-war liberal democracies have personally witnessed violent extremist attacks, we live, for the most part, in a media-centred world in which issues related to violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism (VRET) appear continually in our collective consciousness through the media (Garbarino et al., 2015). As Garbarino et al. (2015: 19) have stated, the '(p)sychological connection to the immediate victims of terrorist horror is capable of transmitting trauma second hand, and the sensory power of the mass media can make the connection for kids on a scale and with an intensity not previously available'. Just as students' abilities to receive and process information gained from the media varies (Davies, 2014), as does the level of support they receive from their families, it is important that students have opportunities to discuss issues that they encounter through the media at school. Despite this need, there is little knowledge of what kinds of VRET-related themes are discussed in educational settings.

In line with the viewpoints presented in previous studies, this study is rooted in the idea that EIs should be forums in which students' questions, thoughts, emotions and different values, including such issues as recent terror attacks or other forms of violent extremism, can and need to be addressed openly in a safe and constructive environment (e.g. Garbarino et al., 2015; Jerome and Elwick, 2017; Lusk and Weinberg, 1994; Macaluso, 2016). Within these discussions, the objective is also to develop students' reflective and critical thinking skills as well as social cohesion. The need for these discussions is also recognised by students themselves; for example, the secondary school students in Jerome and Elwick's (2017) study emphasised that it would have been useful for them to have discussed VRET-related themes in EIs already when they were younger. However, previous studies have indicated that teachers do not always feel knowledgeable or confident enough to engage in VRET-related, often seemingly controversial, discussions (e.g. Quartermaine, 2016). This may be due to a lack of competence and because educators find it uncomfortable and challenging to facilitate productive discussions about topics such as terrorism (see e.g. Davies and Limbada, 2019; McQueeney, 2014; Pels and De Ruyter, 2012; Quartermaine, 2016).

To provide new insights on the topic, this study gives voice to first-line practitioners and describes their real-life experiences and the challenges they face when dealing with students' mostly spontaneous questions and comments related to complicated societal phenomena. More specifically, the study focuses on how they reflected on their experiences in two questions:

1. What kind of themes associated with violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism have been brought up in classroom discussions?
2. What provided the impetus for these discussions?

The data were collected as part of a broader VRET-related survey conducted among Finnish basic and upper secondary level educators during spring of 2018. The findings are important for developing educational and pedagogically relevant approaches to addressing VRET-related issues in the Finnish national context as well as those of other European countries. Before moving on to discussing VRET-related themes in classrooms, we start by providing a definition of the core concepts used in this study.

Core concepts

Public debates, political discussions and academic research about themes related to VRET, and especially the use of the term *radicalisation*, have increased exponentially in the last two decades (Kundnani, 2012). To avoid perpetuating stereotypes and engaging in excessive simplification (Fernandes et al., 2017) when discussing themes related to VRET in the context of EIs, it is important to have an understanding of such concepts as radicalism, violent radicalisation and extremism, which have been extensively misused, sometimes even as synonyms. To define the concepts, it is essential to bear in mind that ideas regarded as 'radical' or 'extreme' are context-dependent in regard to time, place and power hierarchies (see e.g. Sieckelinck and Ruyter, 2009).

The concepts of radicalism and extremism can be used to describe a way of thinking and acting that differs from the mainstream values or norms of a society (Sedgwick, 2010). These *-isms* are often linked to ideological objectives that promote or advocate certain changes in the current status quo of society (e.g. Sedgwick, 2010). In public, political and academic debates, the concept of radicalisation is often used to describe a process that might lead an individual or group towards extremist forms of thinking and acting and to adopt a worldview that is rejected by mainstream society (e.g. Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Sedgwick, 2010). However, the advocating of extreme or radical ideas does not necessarily refer to the acceptance or use of violence (e.g. O'Donnell, 2016; see also Freire 2016; Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009). Instead, radical ideas and forms of action can be seen as a driving force of society and the true goal of education (e.g. Freire, 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2016). This also means that young people's radical ideas, opinions and actions should not be condemned (Bartlett et al., 2010; Van San et al., 2013), provided that they are expressed in legal and non-violent ways.

To provide a uniform framework for data collection, this study provided the following Finnish Ministry of the Interior's (2016: 9) definition of violent radicalisation and extremism at the beginning of the questionnaire distributed to the selected EIs:

> Violent extremism refers to using, threatening with, encouraging or justifying violence based on one's own view of the world or on ideological grounds. Violent radicalisation is an individual process which may result in a person joining violent extremist groups or action. At its most extreme violent radicalisation can result in terrorist acts.

This definition is used in Finnish policy guidelines (see Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2016) and was considered suitable for the purposes of this study because it does not inherently identify any

specific groups as being especially likely to adopt violently radical worldviews but, rather, provides educators with space to consider a wide spectrum of ideologies.

Addressing VRET in classrooms

Guidelines instructing educational discussions

The ways in which VRET-related issues are addressed in educational settings is central, because without proper support children may be left with anxiety, discomfort, fallacious interpretations or a lack of proper understanding after encountering or hearing about shocking events. This was the case, for example, in the aftermath of 9/11, when many young children mistakenly believed that dozens of planes had crashed into the Twin Towers, instead of two, because the video clips of the crashes were being replayed on the news multiple times. (Garbarino et al., 2015.) An illustrative quote from Jerome and Elwick's study describes students' difficulties in understanding complex social phenomena without educators' support: 'I knew what was going on the [sic] news, but I didn't know how to understand it' (2017: 9). As the quote highlights, children need adults' support in developing the means and knowledge required to critically read and interpret media content and to understand and address the emotional reactions that these events may elicit in them and in other people. As schools are one of the primary settings where most children spend their time, educators are needed to help children foster these skills.

However, it is also important to note that the educators' possibilities and level of pedagogic freedom as well as the requirements for preventing and/or addressing VRET-related issues differ notably across national contexts (e.g. Ghosh et al., 2017). For example, contrary to the previously mentioned context of the UK, Finland does not have any normative guidelines for teachers on how they should address, prevent or counter issues related to VRET in classrooms (Niemi et al., 2018). Whereas handbooks and policies are available for educators (e.g. Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2016; Finnish National Board of Education, 2020), they are not legally binding documents. This type of instruction is aligned with the strong pedagogic freedom that teachers have in the Finnish school system to plan and carry out pedagogical activities in the ways they find most appropriate. This practice is also supported by the high academic training of teachers and minimal hierarchy between teachers and school leaders. (see e.g. Lavonen, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015.)

Regarding the prevention of VRET, the Finnish Ministry of the Interior published a National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism in 2012 and 2016[1] that provides general principles and objectives for different administrative sectors, including education (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2012, 2016). It is noteworthy that in this Action Plan, the task given to education is primarily the strengthening of students' 21st-century skills (see also Binkley et al., 2012; Geisinger, 2016). These skills include, for example, critical thinking, media literacy, peaceful conflict resolution and competences to interact with different types of people (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2016). They are regarded as important cornerstones for early prevention, as they develop the students' abilities to seek out and evaluate information, and thereby act as means to hinder the adoption of violent propaganda and support the students' growth towards active and responsible citizenship (Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2016). The Action Plan thus mostly emphasises several skills and competences that are already embedded in the main components of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), instead of providing rigorous instructions on how to implement practical prevention or VRET-related discussions as a part of their everyday schoolwork. Therefore, the National Action Plan (2016) can be seen more as a national statement than a preventive educational programme (Niemi et al., 2018).

In contrast to the Action Plan, the Finnish National Core Curriculum has a normative status and it obligates all educators to follow its fundamental values, core functions, objectives and contents (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014; see also Niemi et al., 2018). According to the curricula, the fundamental values that regulate all educational activities are based on recognising basic human rights and the equity and equality of all people (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). Consequently, no actions, contents or activities pursued during the school days can contradict these values. These legally binding policy documents and descriptions of the educational ethos support Finnish EIs in their efforts to create constructive classroom dialogue as well as in their aim to educate critically thinking students in matters of reflective, non-discriminatory, democratic citizenship. However, the ways in which the aforementioned objectives, values and missions are understood, prioritised, transmitted into organisational practices or mediated to the pupils may nonetheless take many forms (Niemi et al., 2018).[2]

Practices and challenges of VRET-related classroom discussions

The different guidelines for educators in different countries indicate the increased need to address issues of extremism in EIs. Several scholars have highlighted that students need to be supported and encouraged to express their feelings, questions and concerns about emotive, sensitive and controversial issues without having to fear negative repercussions (e.g. McCully, 2006; Sjøen and Jore, 2019). However, scholars have also recognised several challenges that educators face when discussing VRET-related themes with their students (e.g. Davies, 2009, 2016). Many of these issues are related to the way the students perceive their teachers as authorities. For example, in Jerome and Elwick's (2017) study, students expressed a high level of trust towards their teachers as objective or 'non-partisan' sources of information regarding VRET issues. These findings thus imply that to be worthy of students' trust, educators first need to have independent and reliable information about the phenomena. It is also essential that educators critically reflect on their own beliefs, values and worldviews, all of which guide the ways in which they interpret the world (e.g. Ghosh et al., 2017; Valk, 2009). Without being aware of their own predispositions towards different ideologies and values, there exists the risk that educators end up unconsciously transferring their own possible prejudices, biases and intuitive responses to pupils (see Vallinkoski et al., 2020).

Another central question concerns the educators' pedagogic competence in addressing VRET-related issues in classrooms. In addition to personally knowing the key concepts, phenomena and ideologies, a central aspect of educators' competences involves the pedagogical ways in which they facilitate in-class discussions. For example, studies have emphasised the importance of creating a supportive and sensitive classroom ethos as a crucial pre-requisite for constructive dialogue (e.g. McCully, 2006). Jakubowski (2001) has argued that playing the role of a discussion facilitator rather than an expert with regard to controversial issues can promote open and relaxed dialogue in the classroom (see also Lusk and Weinberg, 1994). This can empower students to clarify their own thinking, speak critically and thereby generate understanding of the social world. In addition to the role of discussion facilitator, Reeves and Sheriyar (2015: 26) have suggested that educators should act as the 'moral mentors' of the discussion. This idea does not, however, mean that educators should offer certain 'truths' or oversimplified explanations regarding what is approved of in society and what is not (McCully, 2006). Rather, the aim of moral mentorship is to teach students to understand that complex issues entail numerous aspects (see also Narvaez, 2010).

Contrary to the previously presented viewpoints, studies have also suggested that educators who feel ill-equipped to address sensitive or controversial issues may avoid doing so (see e.g. Davies, 2016; McCully, 2006; Quartermaine, 2016; Rosvall and Öhrn, 2014). For example,

according to Quartermaine (2016), educators have concerns about their abilities to create a safe learning environment and to adequately address students' possible prejudices, which might come out in highly sensitive discussions. Therefore, they also fear that the discussions could have unwanted consequences by exacerbating social divisions and students' prejudices rather than deconstructing them (Quartermaine, 2016). A study by Rosvall and Öhrn (2014) found that vocational educators primarily responded with silence in situations where students made racist or xenophobic comments. Another study from Sweden reported that educators' reactive responses to hateful comments by openly racist students' mostly consisted of choosing to isolate them from their peers (Mattsson and Johansson, 2020) instead of taking proactive and more constructive actions. In some cases, educators' endeavours to provide safe learning environments have led to situations in which the teachers aim to avoid any kind of conflicts in the classroom. This approach is problematic if it means that controversial or sensitive issues related to political or religious themes cannot be addressed in EIs (Sieckelinck et al., 2015). As Davies (2014: 453, 464) has pointed out, the idea of having a 'safe space' in the classroom does not mean that conflicts or sensitive issues should be avoided; rather, the aim of dialogue is to create *educative turbulence*, which can prompt students to engage in moral considerations and grow in understanding.

Whereas the aforementioned remarks and challenges regarding discussions about VRET-related themes in EIs are mainly of an international nature, the themes and issues that emerge in discussions are also influenced by national context. The next section will outline the occurrence of ideologically motivated violence in Finland, thereby helping to situate the findings of this study within national, European or global contexts.

Violent extremism in Finland

Finland is a European country that has had very little political violence in recent decades.[3] During its century of independence, it has not witnessed such violent ethno-nationalist conflicts as has, for example, Northern Ireland. A lack of political violence – and especially terrorism – has become an important part of the Finnish national self-image. The way in which different threat scenarios are discussed in policy documents and public debate indicate that Finland has been commonly presented as a remote safe haven or bird's nest into which dangerous international phenomena, such as terrorism, rarely find their way (Malkki, 2016; Malkki and Sallamaa, 2018).

This self-image, however, has been challenged in recent years as it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the image of remoteness and isolation from negative violent developments in an increasingly globalised world that has brought many of the 'foreign' phenomena closer to home. Just as in nearly every European country, jihadist activism has undergone significant developments in Finland during the wars in Syria and Iraq. The most visible manifestation is that, according to estimates by the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (2018), over 80 people have left for the conflict area. Although jihadist activism in Finland remains small-scale and fragmented compared to many other European countries, more people are now involved in it and the networks have become more organised (Malkki and Saarinen, 2019). Jihadist activists in Finland are also increasingly connected to transnational jihadist networks in Europe and elsewhere. While jihadist activism mainly manifests itself as activities that aim to support violent struggles in conflict zones, Finland has also witnessed its first ever jihadist terror attack. In August 2017, a 24-year-old Moroccan man who had entered Finland in May 2016 as an asylum seeker stabbed several people in the city centre of Turku, killing two and injuring eight people (Safety Investigation Agency, 2018).

These developments have brought the threat of jihadist violence, hitherto seen mainly as a foreign phenomenon, closer to home. This threat is perceived strongly in European and global terms.

Based on reports about the fears and concerns of Europeans (Eurobarometer, 2018: 4), it can be generally concluded that the issues that people view as the biggest threats are not always the themes that are most widespread in their local contexts. Additionally, although manifestations of violent extremism have been rare in Finland, fears and concerns about extremist violence and ideologies feature prominently in Finnish politics and public debates.

Another development that has raised concerns is the rise of far-right activism. So far, it has remained largely non-violent in Finland. The most notable incidents took place in the years 2015 and 2016, when a series of attacks were committed against asylum-seeker centres. These caused material damage but no casualties. The most organised part of the far-right milieu has been the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), which openly supports revolutionary violence. The Supreme Court of Finland placed a temporary ban on the organisation in March 2019 and eventually outlawed it in September 2020. Many NRM members, however, continue their activities in other, more recently established organisations.[4]

Despite the fact that far-right extremism has not been as widespread in Finland as in the other Nordic Countries (see Ravndal, 2018), several politicians and authorities, including the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (2020), have expressed concerns that the situation may not remain that way. For the first time, the Security and Intelligence Service (SUPO) has now explicitly stated in its national security review that the danger of right-wing extremism and terrorism has grown in western countries, including Finland (Finnish Security Intelligence Service, 2020). The polarised political climate, together with discourses among the far right and anti-immigration milieu that justify the use of violence, have raised concerns that lone actors or small groups may be inspired to move into action. These concerns are partly fed by international examples, such as the Christchurch mosque shooting in New Zealand in 2019.

When it comes to far-left and anarchist activism during the 2000s, it has remained small-scale and equally non-violent. Also, anti-fascism in Finland has been and continues to be minimal, but it became somewhat stronger during the 2010s.

This does not mean that Finland has been completely spared from destructive acts of symbolic violence. In 2002–2008, there were three such attacks that claimed the lives of 27 people and injured hundreds more. The first, a bomb attack in 2002, took place in the Myyrmanni shopping centre in Vantaa. Two others were Columbine-inspired school shootings (see e.g. Kiilakoski and Oksanen, 2011), which took place in Jokela (2007) and Kauhajoki (2008). The school shootings have had an especially strong influence on Finnish public debate. While the school shootings in Jokela and Kauhajoki remain the best-known and most destructive incidents of this kind in Finland to date, several plans for similar school shootings have been uncovered. There have also been several smaller-scale incidents, most recently in October 2019, when one student died and 10 were wounded in a violent attack carried out by a 25-year-old student at a vocational institution in the city of Kuopio.

The school shootings in Finland have provoked widespread public debate and led to various policies and initiatives geared towards preventing further such incidents and to developing a safety culture and safety and security management for EIs (see e.g. Vallinkoski and Koirikivi, 2020). It is important to point out here that the perpetrators of the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings left behind writings and images clarifying that their attacks were meant to send a political message: the perpetrator of the Jokela school shooting explicitly defined his act as political terrorism and stated that he did not want it to be viewed as a mere 'school shooting' (Malkki, 2014). This might explain why school shootings are seen as a form of violent extremism in Finland and are included in plans to prevent radicalisation into violent extremism.

What is also typical in the Finnish debate on political violence is a reluctance to use the term *terrorism* to describe any incident that occurs in Finland, as terrorism has traditionally been

considered an inherently non-Finnish phenomenon and primarily an export product that may be brought into Finland by people coming from other countries. This notion has been challenged recently, especially when the threat of far-right and anti-immigrant violence has been debated, including how the responses to that threat compare with those in place to counter 'jihadist terrorism'.

Data and methods

Data and research participants

Data for this study were collected during spring of 2018 through an online questionnaire, which mainly consisted of multiple-choice questions but also included six open-ended questions. The study population consisted of Finnish- and Swedish-speaking educators working under different professional titles in basic, general upper secondary and vocational education in urban, semi-urban and rural regions throughout Finland. Basic education in Finland consists of a comprehensive schooling system that includes primary education, classes 1–6 (7- to 12-year-old pupils) and lower secondary education classes 7–9 (13- to 16-year-old pupils). Currently, compulsory education ends when a child has completed the basic education syllabus or when 10 years have passed from the start of their compulsory education, but the majority of students continue studies at the upper secondary education level either in general upper secondary schools or in vocational education. The Finnish education system is free of charge and consists predominantly of public schools. All EIs are obliged to follow the national core curricula created for basic, general upper secondary and vocational education.

Participating EIs were randomly selected from the study population using proportionate stratified sampling to guarantee that the sample reflected the structure of the population (see e.g. Lynn, 2016). The research questionnaire was sent to the sampled EI's principal or school leader, who in turn was asked to distribute it to the staff. However, as the focus of this study is on qualitative findings, we omit a detailed depiction of the sampling process.

The online questionnaire, which was answered by 1149 educators altogether, included four main aspects: demographics, respondents' knowledge and attitudes regarding VRET-related issues, respondents' attitudes towards the prevention of VRET and respondents' experiences with VRET in EIs. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the research participants were provided with the previously presented definition of violent radicalisation and extremism, produced by the Finnish Ministry of the Interior (2016). The respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences and responses based on the definition that was provided.

After the demographic questions, the respondents were asked to respond to the following three questions with either a 'yes' or a 'no':

1. Have you handled students' questions and/or discussions related to the themes of violent radicalisation and extremism?
2. Have you encountered students who express violent extremist beliefs/thoughts (i.e. embrace extremist ideology or accept violence)?
3. Have you encountered violently radicalised students in your work (i.e. acting violently or directly supporting violent acts)?

If the respondents answered 'yes' to any of the aforementioned questions, they were asked to describe these situations in an open-ended response. Altogether, 396 of the 1149 respondents qualitatively described their experiences with students' questions or discussions that included themes of

Table 1. Research participants' demographics.

Gender	Language	Age	School level	Professional title
female 79.9%	Finnish 96.5%	under 30 6.1%	pre-primary 1%	special needs assistant 5%
male 19.2%	Swedish 3.5%	30–34 8.7%	basic education (classes 1–6) 28.4%	class teacher 15.6%
other 0.9%		35–39 10.6%	basic education (classes 7–9) 22.9%	subject teacher 29.1%
		40–44 17.3%	basic education (classes 1–9) 10.9%	special class teacher 4.2%
		45–49 16.8%	general upper secondary 15.1%	special needs teacher4.4%
		50–54 19.9%	basic education and general upper secondary 1.9%	teacher 5.6%
		55–59 12.1%	vocational upper secondary 11.8%	principal 12.1%
		60–64 8.0%	vocational upper secondary for adults 4.6%	member of school welfare group 8.7%
		over 60 0.5%	other 3.4%	vocational teacher 6% vocational trainer 0.9% guidance counsellor 4.4% other 4%

Open-ended answers *n*=396.

violent radicalisation, extremism or terrorism; only these answers are reported in this study. The length of the open-ended responses ranged from 2 to 308 words, resulting in a total of 10,399 words to be analysed In this study.

Research participants' demographics (*n*=396) are presented in Table 1.

Method and analysis

The thematic, data-driven content analysis of the aforementioned qualitative open-ended answers (*n*=396) proceeded in three phases. In the first phase of the analysis, the answers were divided into two categories: (a) answers describing what themes related to VRET participants mentioned as topics of discussion in EIs (hence, discussion themes); and (b) answers describing how the themes related to VRET arise during discussions in EIs (hence, impetus).

In the second phase of the analysis, the answers were reduced and grouped according to their similarities and differences, after which they were further categorised into sub-groups. In the third phase, the data were further divided into main groups based on the sub-groups' characteristics. Through this process, four main discussion themes and four main impetus groups were identified in the data. The analytical process and main findings are summarised in Figure 1.

Findings

The four main discussion themes identified from the date were entitled as follows: T1: understanding and defining VRET; T2: emotions, safety and security; T3: immigration and minorities; and T4: ethical and moral considerations. The four main impetuses for discussion were entitled as follows: I1: recent violent attacks; I2: content or objective of certain school subjects; I3: information/
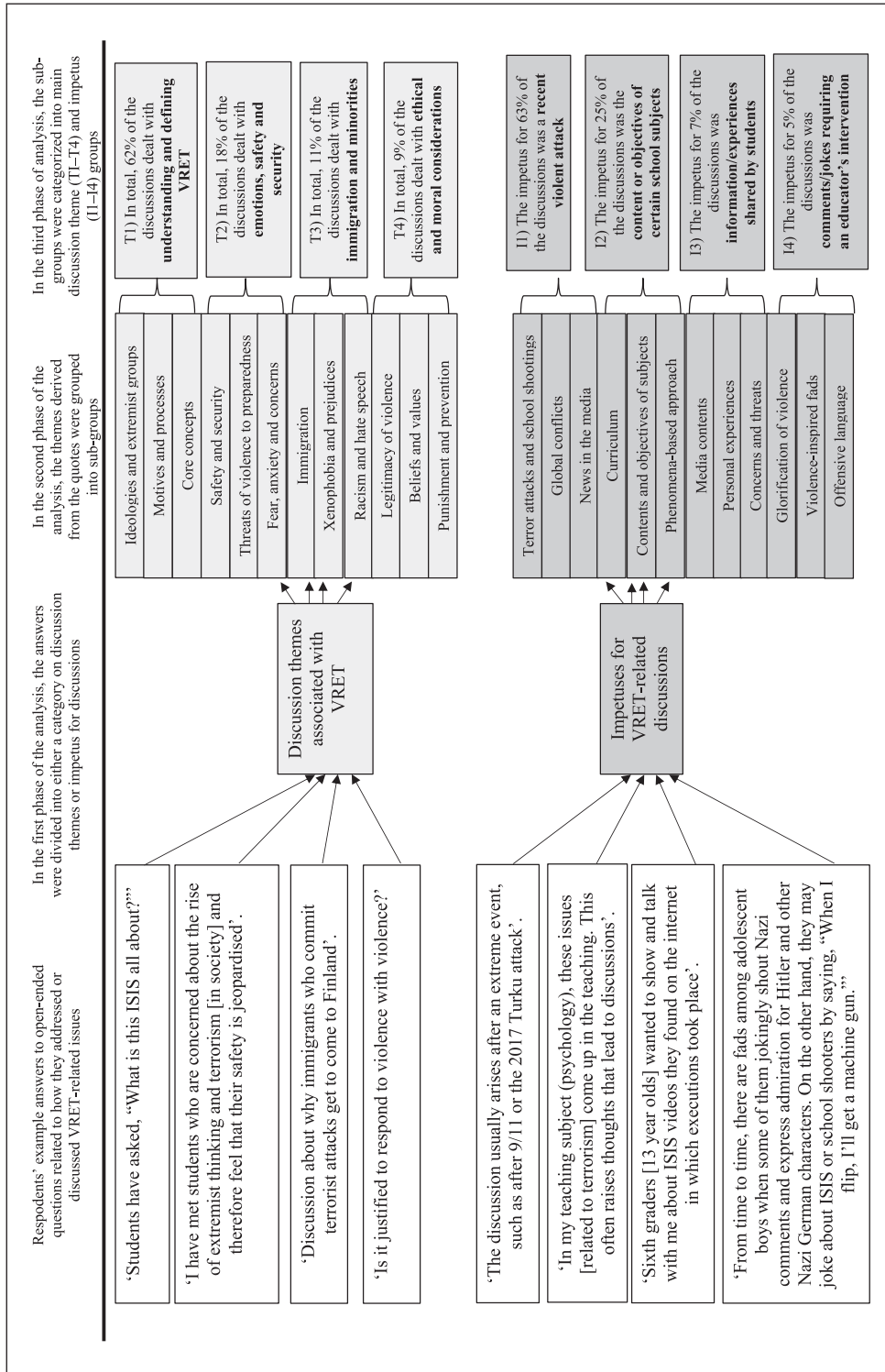
Respondents' example answers to open-ended questions related to how they addressed or discussed VRET-related issues

In the first phase of the analysis, the answers were divided into either a category on discussion themes or impetus for discussions

In the second phase of the analysis, the themes derived from the quotes were grouped into sub-groups

In the third phase of analysis, the sub-groups were categorized into main discussion theme (T1–T4) and impetus (I1–I4) groups

Discussion themes associated with VRET

Ideologies and extremist groups
Motives and processes
Core concepts

Safety and security
Threats of violence to preparedness
Fear, anxiety and concerns

Immigration
Xenophobia and prejudices
Racism and hate speech

Legitimacy of violence
Beliefs and values
Punishment and prevention

T1) In total, 62% of the discussions dealt with **understanding and defining VRET**

T2) In total, 18% of the discussions dealt with **emotions, safety and security**

T3) In total, 11% of the discussions dealt with **immigration and minorities**

T4) In total, 9% of the discussions dealt with **ethical and moral considerations**

'Students have asked, "What is this ISIS all about?"'

'I have met students who are concerned about the rise of extremist thinking and terrorism [in society] and therefore feel that their safety is jeopardised'.

'Discussion about why immigrants who commit terrorist attacks get to come to Finland'.

'Is it justified to respond to violence with violence?'

Impetuses for VRET-related discussions

Terror attacks and school shootings
Global conflicts
News in the media

Curriculum
Contents and objectives of subjects
Phenomena-based approach

Media contents
Personal experiences
Concerns and threats

Glorification of violence
Violence-inspired fads
Offensive language

I1) The impetus for 63% of the discussions was a **recent violent attack**

I2) The impetus for 25% of the discussions was the **content or objectives of certain school subjects**

I3) The impetus for 7% of the discussions was **information/experiences shared by students**

I4) The impetus for 5% of the discussions was **comments/jokes requiring an educator's intervention**

'The discussion usually arises after an extreme event, such as after 9/11 or the 2017 Turku attack'.

'In my teaching subject (psychology), these issues [related to terrorism] come up in the teaching. This often raises thoughts that lead to discussions'.

'Sixth graders [13 year olds] wanted to show and talk with me about ISIS videos they found on the internet in which executions took place'.

'From time to time, there are fads among adolescent boys when some of them jokingly shout Nazi comments and express admiration for Hitler and other Nazi German characters. On the other hand, they may joke about ISIS or school shooters by saying, "When I flip, I'll get a machine gun."'

Figure 1. Summary of the analytical process and main findings.

experiences shared by students; and I4: comments/jokes requiring educator's intervention. These main themes and impetuses are discussed in the following paragraphs. The reported prevalence of each main discussion theme and impetus has been calculated based on the total number of described discussion themes and impetuses in the data. The quotes from the data have been translated from Finnish or Swedish by the authors, and original quotations will supplement the analysis. In some of the quotes, the authors have added clarifications to the text, and these instances have been marked by square brackets.

Discussion themes associated with VRET

Discussion theme 1: understanding and defining VRET. The majority (62%) of the identified classroom discussions regarding VRET considered general issues related to defining and depicting the VRET phenomenon. The conversations were thus associated with topical issues, such as violent attacks, conflict and crises, extreme ideologies and groups, the whys and wherefores, and the core concepts being used, such as terrorism, extremism and radicalisation.

According to the data, global (and national) attacks carried out by (or in the name of) ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIL and Daesh) and jihadism on a larger scale were the themes addressed most often in discussions in Finnish EIs. The findings also revealed that the majority of discussions in the classroom considered religiously motivated violence, whereas discussions about politically motivated actions represented only a minority of discussions. This finding resonates with Jerome and Elwick's (2017: 6) research, in which students mentioned that 'the media only really talks about Muslim terrorists, they brush over other forms of terrorism'.

The confusion and simplifications related to religiously motivated violence, especially with regard to Islam, are highlighted in quotes 1 and 2 below:

> Q1: In religious education lessons, a student asked, 'What is the difference between Islam and extremist Islam?' We talked briefly [about it]. (Class teacher in basic education classes 1–6)

> Q2: Students have sometimes talked about the violence caused by Islam. (Subject teacher at vocational institution)

One of the main themes of discussion related to the phenomenon of ideologically motivated violence had to do with the concepts associated with it. In addition to the core concepts, the reasons and motivations for, as well as the pathways to, violent extremism were a key topic of discussion. Regarding current terrorist attacks, the data show that discussions concentrate significantly on the individuals or groups behind them. Conversely, instances in which educators stated that discussions dealt with the roles of victims or rescue workers were remarkably rare.

One of the key findings on discussions dealing with VRET is that the topic interested all pupils regardless of age. According to the educators' responses, the whys and wherefores were the central topics of discussion across all grade levels. Whereas young students asked their educators questions such as 'What is this ISIS all about?', whether ISIS is 'evil' and 'Why does someone want to hurt another?' (see also quote 3 below), older students discussed, for example, the psychological and social processes behind radicalisation, as exemplified by quote 4:

> Q3: Primary school students are aware of the global events and ask the teacher, 'Why do such bad things happen?' (Principal, class teacher and subject teacher in pre-primary and basic education classes 1–6)

> Q4: In [classes on] philosophy, psychology and religious education, [there has been] common reflection and consideration about the link between radicalisation and religions, the causes and process of

radicalisation, and the motives for terrorism, and the link between radicalisation and mental health/illness. (Subject teacher and guidance counsellor at the general upper secondary level)

Discussion theme 2: emotions and safety/security. In total, 18% of the discussions described in the data touched directly on issues related to emotions, the threat of violence, its probability and feelings related to safety and/or security. According to the responses, the students' feelings of safety appeared to decrease, especially after recent attacks. In these situations, students needed a considerable amount of support to handle their feelings of anxiety and fear as well as to maintain their feelings of safety, as the following quotes demonstrate. Additionally, some educators reported students' concerns about the future. In this category, the responses emphasised the role of student welfare team members as interlocutors, as the majority of the discussions took place between students and, for example, school psychologists or social workers:

Q5: I have mainly met students who are concerned about the rise in extremist thinking and terrorism [in society] and who, therefore, feel that their safety is jeopardised. (Member of school welfare team at the general upper secondary level)

Q6: Students' questions, for example, were about the background to the stabbing in Turku [terror attack in 2017]. Processing students' fears and anxiety [was important]. (Member of school welfare group in basic education classes 1–9)

Related to the dimensions of safety and security, two aspects dominated the discussions. First, students wanted to know whether violent actions could affect them (quote 7). Second, they wanted to know how to act and what to do if this kind of act of violence took place at their schools (quotes 8 and 9). The annual safety drills also raised some questions about possible violent actions and operating models within the students' EIs (quote 10):

Q7: These topics preoccupy the students, and they bring them up in discussions based on what they see and hear on the news. They want to know about the reasons and whether they could be affected by threatening or dangerous acts. (Special class teacher in basic education classes 1–6)

Q8: After [the school shootings in] Jokela and Kauhajoki, the students asked, 'What if the same happens at our school? What should we do? Can someone at our school be a [future] school shooter?' (Subject and special needs teacher in basic education classes 7–9)

Q9: Students' discussions were about terrorism after the stabbings in Turku, and they wondered what should be done if a terrorist appeared here in our school. (Class teacher in basic education classes 1–6)

Q10: Every autumn at our school, we practise exiting the school premises for fire safety. At the same time, we discuss a lockdown situation if there were any external threats to our premises. This raises questions, because it is also practised and discussed. Students wonder who would attack the school, what they would do, how they would react, what would happen if an attack occurred, and how the lockdown could prevent the attack. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 1–9)

Discussion theme 3: immigration and minorities. The educators' responses reveal that students tend to intuitively associate VRET with some larger phenomena. As evident already from the first discussion theme, one such phenomenon is religion (especially Islam). Another that came up repeatedly in various responses was immigration and minorities. The responses suggest that students linked immigration and certain minorities to themes related to ideologically motivated violence, and xenophobic and polarised stances – even justification for violence towards the aforementioned

groups – were reported. Altogether, 11% of the discussions mentioned in the data were somehow related to immigration and minorities.

The educators stated that discussions about recent terror attacks often led to debates about immigrants and minority groups, who were seen in a negative light and, at times, even framed as potential extremists and terrorists (quotes 11 and 12). As quote 13 indicates, the issues discussed also related to Finnish immigration policies. Additionally, racist views about immigrants as a threat and an expense to Finnish society were expressed:

> Q11: Students often rant about how all immigrants are terrorists. (Special needs assistant in basic education classes 7–9)

> Q12: [The discussions included] reflections about why Finland accepts immigrants who commit terrorist attacks. (Special needs teacher of basic education classes 1–6)

> Q13: Students wonder why Finland accepts such people who do not easily integrate into our country. Why is everything paid for them? Smartphones are bought for them, and 20 euros per month is given to them. In addition, they can call their home countries once a week, if they wish. Moreover, they can go on holiday to their home countries – to Iraq or Somalia – even though they left there to flee the war. Students in our own country subsist with little money and student grants, and they can't get any clothes, mobile phones, etc., for free, or any money for holidays trips. (Vocational teacher at vocational upper secondary school)

These types of discourses are examples of narratives focusing on the experiences of injustice and framing certain population groups as scapegoats for the misfortunes of others. These arguments produce an imaginary about immigrants as a coherent group of people who all share the same features, who are viewed as having come to Finland for no justifiable reason and who are incapable of integrating into the country. Immigrants were also depicted as an unwelcome and unjustified expenditure for taxpayers. One educator reflected on how the election campaign of the populist Finns Party had clearly influenced some children and young people:

> Q14: When talking about multiculturalism, many [students] feel they have the right to criticise immigrants or to verbally express that the violence that immigrants/asylum seekers face is not wrong. Before the election, the Finns Party campaign seemed to shape the views of children and young people, and these issues have also been discussed. (Subject teacher and guidance counsellor in basic education classes 7–9 and general upper secondary school)

The tensions related to immigration and the threat of violence were not, however, related solely to students' imaginaries about immigrants. Rather, the students also expressed extremist and xenophobic ideas. As quote 14 above illustrates, according to the educators some students expressed the sentiment that violence towards immigrants is 'not wrong'.

In addition to the aforementioned polemic opinions, this theme also included more extensive discussions about refugees and immigration policies in Finland in general. The refugee crisis and immigrants' reasons and motivations for coming to Finland were among the issues that were addressed, in addition to general questions about Finland and immigration. The data also included examples of situations in which classroom discussions about these topics resulted in positive outcomes. For example, quote 15 provides a description about a situation in which these issues were discussed 'in a good spirit' before new students with immigrant backgrounds came to specific schools:

> Q15: A class of Finnish-speaking pupils was worried about asylum-seeker students coming to our school. They were concerned about their motivations for coming to Finland and they wondered how we could be

sure that there would be no 'ISIS guys' coming to our school. Things were discussed in a good spirit, and I think things went well after that. (Class teacher in basic education classes 7–9)

Discussion theme 4: ethical and moral considerations. Of the responses, 9% of discussions addressed ethical and moral considerations regarding the justification and acceptability of violence and the values behind the use of ideologically motivated violence. It is noteworthy that, according to the teachers' descriptions, during the discussions the students were often interested in hearing what their educators thought about VRET-related themes. This relates not only to the aforementioned point about teachers being regarded as trustworthy sources of information, but also to the views regarding educators as moral mentors (Reeves and Sheriyar, 2015).

Another core topic related to the ethical considerations included the beliefs and values of individuals engaging in ideologically motivated violence. In these discussions, the role of religious beliefs was again emphasised (see quote 17). The teachers provided examples of discussions in which the relationship between religion and violence was considered, as well as of situations in which the students expressed an assumed superiority of one religion over others. Themes related to power, authority and psychological influences (quote 18) in general were also evident. The appropriate punishments for and responses to terror attacks were also a central topic of discussion. According to the educators, some students expressed views that justified the use of violence in specific cases, such as in response to terrorism (see quote 19):

Q17: Is violence justifiable, and why? For example, based on religion? (Special needs assistant in basic education classes 1–6)

Q18: Students are interested in the subject and bring the theme up in small and large discussions. We have talked about ethical education; the power of parents, teachers and other adults; brainwashing; etc. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 1–9)

Q19: In the Finnish language lessons, students have discussed topical issues (such as the stabbings in Turku) and have raised questions and expressed thoughts about the causes of terrorism. In addition, students have wondered how terrorist acts should be tackled. Terrorist acts have also provoked emotional reactions and thoughts among students that violence should be responded to with violence. (Subject and special needs teacher at a vocational upper secondary school)

The impetus for discussions

Impetus 1: recent violent attacks. A total of 63% of the discussions described in the data related to ideologically motivated violence in classrooms, most often in response to current threats or attacks occurring nearby in Finland or other countries. In addition to current violent attacks, the broader developmental paths in a global context obviously also prompted discussions and questions by the students. Jihadism (especially ISIS) was the theme most often discussed in this category:

Q20: We have, for example, discussed those cases talked about in the news, in which Finnish citizens have joined the ranks of ISIS. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 7–9)

The individual incidents mentioned most often in the data were the terror attack in Turku in August 2017 and the school shootings of 2007 and 2008. School shootings are such exceptional events that even more than 10 years later, students still brought them up in classroom discussions (see quote 21). After the 2007 and 2008 school shootings, threats against schools have become a more

common phenomenon. While most are empty threats, the threats are still a clear cause for concern among students and cause a great deal of discussion (see quote 22):

> Q21: The primary school where I work is located near the school in Jokela, where the 2007 school shooting happened. The school shooting still occasionally raises questions, especially when 6th-grade students are moving to the 7th grade and thereby to that specific school building in which the shooting occurred. They ask questions such as 'Why did it happen?' 'Did the shooter have mental health problems?' 'Was he bullied?' 'Was there some ideology behind his actions?' (Member of school welfare group in basic education classes 1–6)

> Q22: There was an anonymous threat against our school, which provoked a lot of discussion afterwards. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 1–9 and general upper secondary school)

Impetus 2: content or objectives of certain school subjects

While issues related to extremism and terrorism are not explicitly mentioned in the curricula of most school subjects, some of the discussions on these topics derive from the general content or objectives of certain school subjects. This was how 25% of the discussions described in the data came about; that is, the issues related to VRET were characterised by the overall objectives and nature of the subject discipline. In particular, the teachers of history, religious education, psychology, health education, social studies, secular ethics, geography, geology, environment and nature studies, Finnish language and literature, and philosophy mentioned having discussions about VRET-related issues in their subject lessons (see quotes 23–25):

> Q23: In my subjects [religious education, secular ethics, philosophy and psychology], the topic is discussed during teaching. We have been considering, among other issues, what kinds of psychological factors lead to extremism and violence and what kind of extreme thinking occurs among different religions (distinctions between fundamentalism, liberalism, etc.). (Subject teacher in general upper secondary)

> Q24: In both history and social studies, current topics are widely discussed. Pupils have been interested, for example, in the background of jihadism and the motivations for those terrorist acts that received publicity. There have been many good discussions about them. It is interesting how confused they are about religious–political violence, but the violence of the far right and the far left is quickly condemned as simply idiotism. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 1–9)

> Q25: [During the Finnish language and literature lesson,] [w]e watched a documentary about Somalia's freedom of speech and the work of journalists. Female journalists are afraid for their lives. The Somali Islamic extremist movement threatens journalists. We processed the issues by using the drama method (a trial drama). After the drama, we discussed the factors driving communities and individuals to engage in such extreme actions. (Subject teacher in basic education and general upper secondary school)

As the aforementioned quotes illustrate, clear attempts to comprehend the whys and wherefores behind ideologically motivated acts of violence were made in different subject lessons. The discussions that the educators described in the data once again focused heavily on the link between religions and ideologically motivated violence. Few discussions were mentioned in the data that dealt with other factors that possibly led individuals to embrace an extremist ideology, such as political motivations. However, quote 24 brings forward an interesting notion regarding the students' perceived confusion related to politically motivated violence.

Quite predictably, the findings also indicate that a clear difference exists between humanistic and social subjects and subjects such as mathematics, sports, foreign languages and chemistry

when it comes to addressing ideologically motivated violence in the classroom. In the latter subjects, the themes related to VRET are rarely discussed, unless the discussion emerges immediately after topical attacks – that is, through Impetus 1.

Impetus 3: information/experiences shared by students. Discussions related to ideologically motivated violence were also initiated in the classroom through the information or experiences that students wanted to share with their educators. A total of 7% of the described discussions emerged through this impetus.

The discussions included cases in which the students had encountered disruptive material in online games or websites and wanted to discuss it with their educators. Quotes 26 and 27 below provide examples of this occurrence. The student-initiated material was often associated with jihadism. The educators also noted that the behaviour and attitudes of students who play violent games are affected up to a certain point. One disturbing example (quote 28), as told by a teacher, described students' experiences with the merging nature of real-life violence and the violence depicted in online games:

> Q26: Sixth graders [13-year-olds] wanted to show and talk with me about the ISIS videos they found on the Internet, which included executions. I felt that they wanted to share their experiences and abhorrence with me rather than admiration for the actions visible in the videos. (Special needs teacher in basic education classes 1–6)

> Q27: I have had to have discussions with students when they have watched videos online that included extreme violence perpetrated abroad. (Special needs assistant in basic education classes 7–9)

> Q28: Muslim students have talked about threats towards Muslims, for example stabbings in the shop, etc. The latest thing is some kind of 'game' in which one gets points when he or she abuses a Muslim. Pupils hear about these threats through social media. It's difficult as a teacher to know how accurate these things are. (Special needs teacher in basic education classes 1–9)

The data also included cases in which students wanted to inform their educators about their concerns regarding another student's prominent change in behaviour (quote 29) or appearance:

> Q29: Students have been preoccupied by whether other students may have extreme thoughts, as they have thought one of the students has behaved differently – for example, been quieter or more withdrawn. This has provoked questions and even fears among the students. (Vocational teacher at vocational upper secondary school)

Impetus 4: comments/jokes requiring an educator's intervention. Some of the discussions described in the data started after the students posed comments, made jokes or took actions related to ideologically motivated violence, as represented in quote 30. In these discussions, the jokes and inappropriate comments related mainly to Hitler, Nazis, Muslims, school shootings and other massacres. For example, offensive language towards Muslims and the glorification of prominent German Nazis were evident (see quotes 31 and 32):

> Q30: Students are interested in extreme phenomena in society; very often, discussions start with talking excitedly about the subject or by joking. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 1–9 and general upper secondary school)

> Q31: Pupils' knowledge about these themes comes mainly from the media. They may use stereotypical and offensive language in their speech (for example, a piece of garbage screams 'Allahu Akbar!' while jumping

into a trash bin), which may, in turn, offend others, lead to violent confrontations, and, therefore, become a topic of discussion in class. (Special class teacher in basic education classes 1–6)

Q32: From time to time, there are fads among adolescent boys, when some of them jokingly shout Nazi comments and express admiration for Hitler and other prominent German Nazis. On the other hand, they may joke about ISIS or school shooters by saying, 'When I flip, I'll get a machine gun.' (Subject teacher in basic education classes 7–9 and general upper secondary school)

The educators also stated that many of these comments were made during periods in which, for example, lessons on 9/11, the Middle East or the history of World War II were being taught. For example, according to the educators' descriptions, drawing or crafting swastikas in school provided an impetus for discussion (see quote 33):

Q33: [One instance had to do with] the construction of anti-Semitic symbols from plywood using a band saw without the teacher's permission. Time did not allow for a very thorough discussion, but I have made it clear to the students what I think of the topic and that I do not tolerate the idolisation of 'pathetic oppressive ideologies' even jokingly. It is my overriding impression that the students were not very serious in those couple of instances when the Nazi ideology and its symbols have come up in students' independent craft. (Subject teacher in basic education classes 7–9)

According to the data, the educators often initiated a debate in the classroom to ensure that the theme would be discussed appropriately after such jokes or inappropriate comments. In many cases, the educators depicted a change in the students' attitudes after they had engaged in appropriate discussions. Conversely, some of the respondents thought that these kinds of jokes and inappropriate comments may be the students' way of processing their emotions and the only way for them to raise difficult themes during classroom discussions without the risk of losing face. Therefore, they considered it perhaps unwise to bypass such comments by interpreting them as mere jokes, especially if the students have no other ways of addressing these themes.

Discussion and conclusion

International research findings have revealed several challenges that educators face when addressing VRET-related issues in EIs (e.g. Davies, 2009, 2016; Ghosh et al., 2017; Quartermaine, 2016), prompting the present study on the current situation in Finnish schools and the kinds of VRET-related themes Finnish educators have encountered during their discussions with students, as well as the impetus for such discussions. Regarding research question 1 ('What kind of themes associated with VRET have been brought up in classroom discussions?'), the findings show that the themes associated with VRET were mostly related to an understanding of the phenomena and the concepts related to it, to personal feelings of safety and security, to immigration and minorities, and to ethical and moral considerations regarding the use of ideologically motivated violence.

Despite the fact that the study data highlights a large number of student-initiated comments that included some elements of far-right rhetoric in the form of racism and xenophobia, the subject discussions themselves in Finnish EIs focused primarily on the threats associated with religious incentives or ideologies. Other ideological orientations were either less frequently discussed (e.g. the far right) or virtually ignored (e.g. the far left and anarchist milieu). It is, however, notable that this distortion is not in line with national threat assessments (see Finnish Security Intelligence Service, 2018, 2020), so it remains unclear why so few discussions related to non-religious ideologies were reported by the educators. We can speculate, however, that this is a reflection of the European trend in the public debate, where especially jihadist terrorism has dominated the discussion on terrorism and violent extremism.

Another potential explanation for this disparity in discussion topics can be at least partly construed from the educators' own intuitive responses and unconscious biases with regard to VRET. As the data show only what the educators report as being discussed, it is possible that discussions about violent jihadism come to their minds first when they are asked about the representation of VRET and that this issue is, therefore, reported more comprehensively. The results also demonstrate that the students seem to have a great deal of trust and interest in their educators' opinions, hence it is necessary for educators to reflect upon and develop skills and competences to address VRET-related issues as they come up in the classroom (e.g. Finnish Ministry of the Interior, 2016; Niemi et al., 2018). Without teachers' competences to critically reflect upon their own imaginaries, understanding and knowledge about VRET-related themes, there exists a risk that the contents of emerged discussions will be partially shaped by the educators' own intuitive responses, epistemic distortions or incomplete understandings (e.g. Niemi et al., 2018; Vallinkoski et al., 2020).

Whereas terrorism-related issues were mostly addressed in relation to religion and arose as a result of current events, the discussions focusing on immigration included strongly xenophobic attitudes and even justifications for the use of violence against immigrants. Therefore, it is important for educators to recognise and be able to distinguish between the discourses focused on fears and feelings related to being a (potential) victim and those that are built on narratives of violent ethno-nationalist ideologies. Thus, although the educational setting needs to be safe and open to provide a platform that supports students' critical thinking and the development of trustful relationships between students and teachers (e.g. Jakubowski, 2001; Lusk and Weinberg, 1994), the findings also point to the need for the latter to consciously assume the role of 'moral mentors', in keeping with Reeves and Sheriyar (2015). In the Finnish context, the national curricula and their fundamental values, such as recognition of human rights and the equity and equality of all people (e.g. Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), provide expedient and normative guidelines and a school ethos upon which to rely in cases where moral mentorship is needed.

The idea of a threat was also visible in discussions focusing on the local level, such as school security and the risk of being subjected to violent school shootings in one's own daily environment. These types of discussion topics have intensified in Finland over the last 10 years and made it important for educators to adequately address students' concerns about their safety and security in school. Thus, the idea of safeguarding the children from harm and excess stress, which is an issue that has been highlighted in numerous international discussions (e.g. Davies, 2009, 2016; Gearon, 2013; O'Donnell, 2016; Quartermaine, 2016), is an important topic that requires educators' continuous and heightened attention.

Regarding the impetus for classroom discussion, the findings for research question 2 ('What provided the impetus for these discussions?') revealed four main reasons for having VRET-related discussion in classrooms: recent violent attacks, the content and objectives of certain school subjects, information shared by students and comments or jokes requiring educators' intervention. Within these impetuses, it is noteworthy that apart from those situations in which the themes were addressed as part of the discipline's content, the educators' roles were primarily described as being reactive instead of proactive. The active role of the students in raising themes related to VRET during discussions can be interpreted as a sign of trust existing between students and educators, as the findings indicate that young people are willing to discuss these issues in EIs and that they are interested in their teachers' viewpoints (see also Jerome and Elwick, 2017). While the active role of students is a positive sign of a trusting and open classroom culture, it may also limit the discussions to covering only certain student-initiated themes. If educators adopt a passive approach, in which discussions begin only through students' initiatives, the students may be left with a rather incomplete understanding of the themes related to ideologically motivated violence, its

motivations and prevalence, and the tools used to place the related mass-mediated discussions in a larger societal and historical context from an accurate perspective.

Additionally, the study findings emphasise the role of the media as a source of information for the students and highlight the need to help them deal with the disturbing material they confront online as well as develop critical thinking skills. As part of and in relation to these skills, the students themselves should also be able to develop the ability to question and ponder why certain motives and groups are represented more than others in the media and in public and political debates, as well as whether public debates present the occurrence of ideologically motivated violence from an expedient and truthful perspective.

Regarding the limitations of the study, it is important to bear in mind that it is based on educators' responses to a questionnaire. There is, thus, no way to assess the truthfulness of the responses or to ascertain how comprehensively the educators have reported on their encounters with these issues in educational settings. To acquire a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of VRET-related discussions in EIs, and especially educators' responses to students' racist or potentially even extremist views, studies utilising a different methodology (e.g. observation or interviews) are needed.

However, despite the limitations, the main findings of this study support the ideas of previous research on the need to view and develop classrooms as safe spaces in which students are able to dissent and listen as they discuss politics and worldviews. In such safe spaces, values and ideas can be expressed, discussed, confronted and questioned; students are asked to improve their critical thinking and to look beyond taboos and prejudices; and, through meaningful dialogue, students are encouraged to broaden their horizons with respect to democracy, human rights, diversity and equality (see e.g. Davies, 2014; Fink et al., 2013; Jakubowski, 2001; Macaluso, 2016; O'Donnell, 2016). These abilities are central to moderating the polarisation of values and ideologies in EIs and in multicultural and pluralistic societies at large.

One of the most profound findings of this study is that educators at different school levels regularly face student-instigated questions and discussions related to VRET. This means that addressing issues related to VRET is not a choice but, rather, a fixed feature of educational work.

The results of this study thus highlight the importance of ensuring that educational research, practice and policies do not focus solely on *preventing* and *countering* violent radicalisation; the results also underscore the importance of remembering that children and adolescents are globally living and growing up in societies in which ideologically motivated acts of violence form part of the political and societal environment. Therefore, other kinds of policies and educational practices are needed in EIs in addition to prevention to increase the possibility for students to address and discuss themes related to VRET, to promote their general well-being, development and efforts at becoming active citizens, and to comprehend and put into perspective the phenomenon of ideologically motivated violence.

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Notes

1. After this study was completed, the third version of the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism was compiled and published in February 2020. All the authors of this article were involved in the revision process.
2. For more elaborate depiction of the Finnish educational system's elements of educational status, the ethos and organisational practices, see Niemi et al. (2018).
3. For a more elaborate summary of violent extremism in Finland since the 1990s, see Malkki and Sallamaa (2018: 866–869).
4. For a more comprehensive overview of the legal process to ban the Nordic Resistance Movement in Finland, see https://sciencenorway.no/blog-extremists-researchers-zone/the-case-against-the-nordic-resistance-movement-in-finland-an-overview-and-some-explanations/1765952.

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