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# How and Why Education Counters Ideological Extremism in Finland

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**Abstract:** The intensification of radical and extremist thinking has become an international cause of concern and the fear related to terrorism has increased worldwide. Early 21st century public discourses have been correspondingly marked by hate speech and ideological propaganda spread from a variety of perspectives through the intensified presence of global social media networks. In many countries, governments have reacted to these perceived and actual threats by drafting policies and preventive programs and legal-security interventions to tackle radicalization, terrorism itself, as well as ideological extremism. Many of the current strategies point to the critical role of societal education. As a result, educational institutions have gained growing importance as platforms for different kinds of prevention protocols or counter-terrorism strategies. However, notably less attention has been paid on the consistencies of values between the aims of the educational strategies for preventing or countering ideological extremism and the core functions of education in fostering individual and societal well-being and growth. Using Finnish education as a case, this paper discusses the challenges and possibilities related to educational institutions as spaces for preventing violent extremism, with special regard to the religious and nationalistic ideologies that divert from those inherent in the national hegemony. This study highlights the need to plan counter-terrorism strategies in line with national educational policies through what we conceptualize as ‘institutional habitus’.

**Keywords:** religion; security; nationalism; political violence

## 1. Introduction

One of the key elements for maintaining social cohesion and integration within a nation is through schooling. The socialization of the individual with the community, such as a society, happens through various dimensions including the psychological sense of belonging, the practical dimension of adopting the codes of conduct, and the mindset needed to interpret symbols in a similar way than other group members (e.g., [Habermas 1987](#)). At the core of social integration and cohesion in the community is the individuals’ commitment to the core values of the community that separate a particular group from others and that also creates the foundation for the moral codes for behavior (e.g., [Habermas 1987](#); [Rogoff et al. 2007](#)). However, the recent political and demographic developments related to immigration, expanding right-wing nationalism, and ideologically motivated attacks of terrorism have created severe societal tensions in many European countries. The increase of social polarization has created pressure for societies to enhance their inner cohesion. Related to these tensions

and developments the role of educational institutions has been promoted as central for 'preventing' and 'countering' extremist ideologies in various countries (e.g., Ghosh et al. 2017).

Early 21st century public discourses have been correspondingly marked by hate speech and ideological propaganda spread from a variety of perspectives through the intensified presence of global social media networks. According to the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) published by Europol (2018), altogether 33 religiously inspired attacks were carried out in 2017, leading to the death of 62 people (Europol 2018, p. 23). During the previous year, 2016, the number of attacks in Europe was smaller (13), however the number of casualties was higher (135) than the year before (Europol 2018, p. 23). The most recent attack took place on 12 December 2018 in a Christmas market in Strasbourg, France, and led to the death of several people. Although these acts depict only a narrow image of the situation (Malkki and Sallamaa 2018), they have had a notable influence on the feeling of citizens' safety across Europe (Europol 2018). These events have also created a situation in which terrorism is increasingly portrayed as a threat that has its origins in religious ideologies culminating to the rhetorics of Jihadism (Malkki and Sallamaa 2018), and where the role of religious convictions as motivators for violent attacks is easily either over- or underestimated. Alongside these developments the popularity of neo-nationalist right-wing parties has increased across Europe (Eger and Valdez 2014). However, it is also important to notice that the way these themes and tensions present themselves varies notably between countries. For example, Finland, throughout its history, has only had one case (in 2017) in which a terrorist attack has been claimed to be carried out in the name of the Islamic terrorist group of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, Finland has experienced various other forms of terrorism and violence, including two school shootings in 2007 and 2008, which were not founded on religious or nationalist ideologies (e.g., Malkki and Sallamaa 2018). This illustrates that although a global-level phenomenon, various forms of violent extremisms and the intertwined ideological polarizations also need to be examined and discussed in their local contexts.

Although many countries have introduced educational prevention strategies especially concerning religious or nationalistic extremism (e.g., Ghosh et al. 2016), notably less consideration has been given to the ways in which these preventative aims are aligned with the core functions and objectives of the respective educational system (see also Davies 2009). For developing the discussion on how education may contribute to the prevention of violent extremism, we suggest that attention should not only be paid on the official curriculum content, but also on the core values and structures of the 'hidden' curricula (Jackson 1968) of educational systems. By hidden curriculum, we refer to the characteristics of education that are based on the prevailing societal values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations, but which often remain undisclosed and unquestioned. Hidden curriculum indicates 'what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction' (Sambell and McDowell 1998, pp. 391–92).

This paper presents a holistic approach for identifying some of the key challenges and possibilities for preventing violent extremism in the Finnish context of basic education. For providing a context for our discussion, we will start by providing a short overview of the current concerns related to educational prevention strategies internationally, before moving onto discussing the Finnish context in more detail. In our analysis of the Finnish context, we will pay special attention to the role of religion as a part of the discussions framing national cohesion and the concern for extremism. For discussing the ways in which the prevention of extremism can be approached from the perspective of the core educational functions, we will introduce the concept of institutional habitus that we will use to depict the core functions and objectives of the Finnish educational system. We conclude our paper with a discussion about the consistency of values depicted in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014, henceforth referred as FNAE) and the National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Radicalisation and Extremism in Finland (Ministry of the Interior 2016).

## 2. Addressing Violent Extremism in Education

As the international literature reviews and policy analyses carried out, for example, by Ghosh et al. (2016), Gearon (2013), and Christmann (2012) bring forward, the way in which formal education can act as a supportive element against the attraction of violent ideologies has become an increasingly important aspect in educational policies in many countries across the world. However, the role given to education also takes many forms—depending on national setting—and it should not be assumed that all educational systems have similar objectives (e.g., Ghosh et al. 2016). Instead, educational systems differ notably, for example, in the ways in which they support the relationship between the individual and the society and how, for example, religions and worldviews are taken into account in the societal educational arenas and integrated or excluded from both content areas and educational practices—and, in connection to that, regarded as public or private issues. For example, the public education in Pakistan perceives religion as a public issue and has an intention to strengthen the Islamic identities of all students through the public education system (Ghosh et al. 2016, p. 20). In contrast, France has a strongly secular agenda where religion needs to be kept in the private sphere of life (e.g., Casanova 2009), whereas Finland emphasizes the freedom of religion as a starting point for both public and private practices (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). Likewise, the impact and quality of education are dependent on factors such as the level of access to education, the training of teachers, and quality and availability of teaching materials.

However, despite of the differences that underline the characters of public educational systems in different contexts, research suggests some common guidelines that education should focus on when aiming to prevent the attraction of violent ideologies and increasing social interaction within societies. These include, for example, the enhancement of young people's resilience towards extremist ways of thinking by providing them with various types of content knowledge concerning international rights and agreements (e.g., Davies 2016), different worldviews and religions (e.g., Author, various dates), as well as by providing the young people with positive, inclusive experiences of the schools as a safe social place (e.g., Skovdal and Campbell 2015; Tucker et al. 2015). However, recent experiences have shown that implementation of educational prevention agendas is in many ways a complex task, as execution of their goals may take many forms (e.g., Ghosh et al. 2016) depending on the ethos and aims of national education.

In some countries, educational strategies aiming to act as countering forces for violent extremism have come to bind the educators to monitor their students for possible signs of radicalization, as within the 'Prevent' program in the UK (Prevent 2015) or the 'Prévenir pour protéger' (PNPR) plan in France (PNPR 2018). These types of guidelines thus operate under the assumptions that radical or extremist thinking is linked with particular ideologies and background factors. For example, in the context of the British Prevent, the ideologies defined as harmful are the ones that oppose 'fundamental British values' (Gov. UK, Department of Education). However, previous studies have shown that the people taking part in ideologically motivated violent actions, come from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (e.g., Sieckelinck et al. 2015) and it is usually not one but several background factors that together may increase the risk of violent actions (e.g., Hafez and Mullins 2015; King and Taylor 2011). Studies have also shown that the ways in which people start to lean towards violent extremism can take many forms (King and Taylor 2011; Wilner and Dubouloz 2010). Because of the contextual and colliding influences that background factors may have together contribute into, Hafez and Mullins (2015) suggest that radicalization should not even be referred to as a process but rather as a 'puzzle' (Hafez and Mullins 2015). However, this complexity of the phenomenon is often not visible or explicit in the prevention strategies implemented in schools. The strategies that are based on the profiling or monitoring pupils have been strongly critiqued for the ways in which they allow—and even enable—the making of hasty and false conclusions about individuals being 'at risk'. In practice, these agendas have led to overreactions especially concerning the existence of radical Islam in British schools (e.g., Arthur 2015). This type of classification where some students are regarded as vulnerable because of their religion or any other single background factor is also problematic because it

may put constraints on the pedagogical possibilities for open and critical discussions and for addressing sensitive and controversial issues in classrooms (e.g., [Sukarieh and Tannock 2015](#)).

Another key problem related to this approach concerns the oversimplification of the radicalization process and the social and psychological push and pull factors they may involve ([Ghosh et al. 2017](#), see also [Hafez and Mullins 2015](#)). The importance of social belonging has been recognized in various psychological and educational studies as being central for the individual's psychological well-being. However, due to the mixture or 'hybridity' ([Davies 2009](#), p. 189) of coexisting social attachments and memberships people have in their lives, it is extremely difficult to identify, especially from the outside, what it means for an individual to part of a group. Likewise, various forms of social ties are created online making it possible that the social connections are not necessarily visible on the outside ([Schuurman et al. 2017](#)). According to previous studies, social networks—and the lack of them—play a crucial role both in the push and pull factors that attract people to support violent extremist ideologies and join these movements, but also in those cases where the actor has seemed to be working alone (e.g., [Schuurman et al. 2017](#)). These networks often take place online and, as [Droogan et al. \(2018\)](#) have brought forward, social media plays a central role in the ways in which terrorist organizations nowadays carry out their operations from recruitment to communication, both within their network and as regards the ways in which they aim to spread terror among the public.

Contrary to the countries utilizing such educational agendas as those mentioned above, Finland does not have a distinct plan designed specifically for educational institutions. Still, there is a National Action Plan for the prevention of violent radicalism and extremism that defines education as one of the 'key policy sectors' for carrying out prevention include education ([Ministry of the Interior 2016](#), p. 17). 'Prevention' is thus aimed to be carried out principally as a part of everyday schoolwork. There is, however, a notable lack of understanding about the ways in which the content of the National Action Plan should in fact be implemented and transformed into educational practices. Our study aims to contribute towards filling this gap, especially in terms of aiming to identify the ways in which the three fundamental functions of Finnish basic education address religious and nationalist identities, and the ways in which these relate to the internationally recognized need to 'prevent violent extremism through education'. In order to contextualize our examination to the particular national setting, that of Finland, we will briefly present the topical issues concerning religious diversity and right-wing nationalism in the following.

### 3. The Secular–Lutheran Hegemony in Finland

A central issue concerning social cohesion and prevention of violence in many countries relates to the approaches and support education provides on the formation of national identities and self-understanding. As a northern European country, Finland, like the other Nordic countries, has a strong connection to Christianity in its history and the church has traditionally played an important role also in the formation of the school system (e.g., [Poulter et al. 2015](#)). The role of Christianity was also central in the narratives used for creating a national 'Finnish' identity to differentiate the new nation from the others during the strives for independence in the early 1900. Similarly to all types of social communities, the collective identity defining a nation is based on shared understandings of symbolic representations, sense of belonging, and imaginaries that separate the group from other groups (see e.g., [Anderson 2006](#); [Hall 1997](#); [Habermas 1987](#)). In the Finnish context the linkage between Christianity, particularly Evangelic-Lutheranism as part of 'Finnishness' has created a hegemony that is still notable. Despite or the increase in secular values and plurality of other religious traditions in the society, a vast majority, around 71 percent, of Finnish people are members of the Evangelic–Lutheran church ([Official Statistics Finland 2017](#)). The number of people not belonging to any religious communities is around 26 percent and the number of people belonging to other religious communities is around 2.4 percent ([Official Statistics Finland 2017](#)). Whereas these numbers do not necessarily tell much about the ways in which people identify as being religious or nonreligious (see e.g., [Day 2009](#)) they

provide an example of the hegemonic position that Christianity has had, and still has, in being the main religious tradition in Finland.

Issues related to religions are also central in the discourses of the nationalistic right-wing movements that exist in Finland. Many of these neo-nationalist, alt-right movements both in Finland and elsewhere oppose immigration and 'nontraditional' and 'non-Western' values (Eger and Valdez 2014) that often culminate in concerns over 'Islamization' of the country. Whereas it is important to recognize the fact that far right parties and white-supremacist movements have many types of orientations and reasons why people join them (Golder 2016; Suttmoeller et al. 2018), these movements typically share a vision of a group that is distinct, and a target of suppression by others (e.g., Atton 2006; Angouri and Wodak 2014). The definition of the 'other', the threat, is thus central in the pursues to 'save' or 'preserve' national identities and/or the economic stability of the nation from being overruled by 'others' (see e.g., Atton 2006). For example, Mäkinen (2017) brings forward that the discussions carried out by the Finnish far-right movements are based on a neoliberal vision of citizenship in which a person's value is connected to their economic productivity. Thus the people, typically immigrants, who are not considered as economically productive, are regarded 'disposable':

"Anti-immigration activism strives to exclude certain groups of people from the realm of respectable and recognized citizenship, and these groups are defined as outsiders specifically in relation to the ideal of neoliberal citizenship. As uselessness and moral deficiency are turned into cultural attributes, these attributes are simultaneously pushed as far away as possible from the anti-immigration activists themselves". (Mäkinen 2017, p. 227)

Similar types of othering have been suggested by Casanova (2009) in cases where religions and worldviews that have become increasingly regarded as a security threat. As Casanova (2009) brings forward, in the time of 'political secularism' religions are not only regarded as passé but they have become increasingly associated with violence. However, as Casanova (2009) also points out, the threat of violence is never associated with one's 'own' tradition that in the European context has been Christian. Likewise, Miah (2017) has claimed that this idea and notion of othering is central also in discourses of terrorism where the root causes and actions related to terrorism are being distanced from the European self-understanding and blamed on someone else (see also Malkki and Sallamaa 2018).

The popularity of right-wing extremism has been steadily growing in various European countries over the last few years (e.g., Eger and Valdez 2014). Whereas there is no single reason for this, the popularity of these movements is typically explained by the way they answer to various types of 'grievances' (Golder 2016). These grievances focus especially on the uncertainties related to declining economic stability, rupturing national cohesion, and needs to strengthen group identity through feelings of superiority, and these movements answer to these needs (Golder 2016). For gaining an overview of the topical themes in the Finnish context, we will shortly present the National Action Plan for Preventing violent extremism and, especially, on the role that the document gives to education.

#### 4. National Action Plan in Finland

Regarding the guidelines for preventing extremism within the Finland, the Finnish Ministry of the Interior has introduced a National Action Plan for the prevention of radicalism and extremism first in 2012 and a second plan in 2016. Regarding the second action plan, the annual report published in 2017 identified six main forms of social and political changes that have increased violent action in both in Finland and internationally. These are increased threat of attack, which refers to attacks by members of Daesh in Syria and within Europe; propaganda, fake news, and hate speech, which refers to the use of social media as a platform for spreading certain types of ideologies (e.g., jihadist propaganda) and for fragmenting social cohesion within societies; volume of hate crimes recorded by the police, which refers to the fact that the number of hate crimes is seen as a factor that may increase the risk of radical violence, as hate speech increases the sense of marginalization and victimization in its targets; number of people residing in the country illegally, which refers to the fact that people

living in poor and vulnerable situations can easily ‘participate in criminal action or be subjected to propaganda and recruitment urging them to join violent radicalization’; and violent far right, which refers to the increasing visibility of groups that strongly resist immigrants and Islam (p. 12) and may take part in violent actions, and networks, which links together people according to their motives, whether religious, national or something else (Ministry of the Interior 2017). The role of education in addressing all of the previously mentioned concerns is central and it extends from developing the young people’s multiliteracy skills to collaborations with the police (Ministry of the Interior 2017).

The National Action Plan calls for the ‘increase competency, expertise, and awareness’ (p. 26) of radicalistic thinking but does not provide any specific instructions about the ways, in which this should be done. Unlike the prevention programs in many other countries (see e.g., Lynch 2013; Davies 2009), the Finnish agenda or report does not start by identifying a specific group that can be considered as vulnerable for adopting radical worldviews, but, instead, highlights the importance of students’ inclusion and well-being as main ways for preventing violent radicalization and extremism. It also suggests that the pathways leading to violent behavior could be separated from other forms of being disadvantaged. However, by saying that educators are not necessarily aware of the background factors and processes that can make students vulnerable for radicalism, the National Action Plan (Ministry of the Interior 2016) insinuates that radicalism is a process that is triggered by external inputs and concerns mainly “vulnerable” students:

“While teachers do notice various signs of radicalization in adolescents, they do not always distinguish how the behavior or various problems may be associated with and make them vulnerable to radicalization. When it comes to the safety and security processes at schools and other educational institutions, it is also important to steer the operating culture towards pupil participation and well-being. Pupil and student welfare services along with case management and service coordination are also important means for breaking the radicalization process. Teachers are professionals in education and, as a part of the teaching process, they are able to improve pupils’ media literacy skills and discernment and thereby increase their understanding on how to influence decision-making in society through non-violent means”.

(p. 17)

From the statement above, it can be noticed that the core values that are taken as self-evident starting points for all education condemn the use of violence. However, instead of simply denying the use of violence, the report aims to highlight different ways for tackling with the underlying pathways and background features that may lead a person into a vulnerable state. The document views violent extremism as a phenomenon that may touch anyone in one form or another. Thus, the primary approach for tackling early signs of violent extremism in schools should not, according to the Action Plan, be based on denying certain thoughts and opinions or judging the people presenting them, but on finding ways that could better support the individual’s well-being and buffer against any harmful developments, such as social exclusion that might make the person vulnerable for various types of influences. In other parts of the document, the Action Plan also points out the complexity of background factors and processes that can be associated with radicalization (p. 12).

The general guidelines focusing on the role of education are wide and, instead of providing practical suggestions for teachers, they highlight the need to provide training for teachers and other people working with young people. The report does not mention the contents that the teachers should be trained about, but merely suggests that “Developing competencies and professional skills is supported by information obtained from research” (p. 26). However, up to date educational research on radicalization and extremisms in the Finnish context is still extremely scarce in Finland.

In order to provide the educators with necessary knowledge about the prevention of radicalization within education, it is not, however, enough to research only the themes that the National action plan has identified as threats. Instead, we claim that attention needs to be given also to the ways in which the Finnish educational system itself transmits values, customs, and various forms of capital (see Bourdieu 1986) and thus act as a space that enables or hinders the push and pull factors of violent

extremism from emerging. For providing a holistic understanding about how and why the role of public education in preventing violent extremism can be approached in the Finnish context, we will introduce the concept of institutional habitus next.

## 5. Institutional Habitus in Finland

The definition of national education is not a tangible, clear-cut construction that remains static over time and place. Rather, it is an ideal, an imagined venture that is actively and continually created on the premises of several fundamental elements that are defined and executed differently in different parts of the world. Being malleable, its objectives and contents are typically adjusted in response to societal changes and needs. Education has always offered powerful means to perpetuate national hegemonies and agendas and to provide citizens with desired social, cultural, and symbolic capital (see e.g., Bourdieu 1986). By defining the values that public education is used to promote, education produces and reproduces an understanding of a social community and the individual's role within that community. Thus, school systems are also one of the key actors that can renew or disrupt the social structures governing the ways in which individuals gain access to power within the society. As Bourdieu (1986) has brought forward, the capital people gain and consume in life is not only financial but also cultural, and social by nature. Whereas having a formal education may increase the individuals' success in accessing economic capital, the process of education itself is important for providing the individual with cultural and social forms of capital. By social capital Bourdieu (1986) refers to social memberships that allow the individual to access the capital acquired and 'owned' by the collective group. Cultural capital, again, refers to the ways in which an individual is able to acquire access to the culture surrounding them both in the forms of thoughts and ideas as well as material objects (Bourdieu 1986). Therefore, in order to discuss and establish the role of education in the prevention of extremisms, it is necessary to understand the fundamental elements that define and delimit national education in each country. Taking Finland as an example, we will shortly describe the contextual specificities of national education next.

The Finnish basic education consists of primary (7–12-year olds) and secondary (13–16-year olds) education. The education system is free and consists predominantly of public schools. Almost all children attend a public school, as the private school sector counts currently less than 90 institutions in Finland (Yksityiskoulujen Liitto ry 2018). All Finnish basic education institutions need to follow the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education that is published by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) and created in a collaborative process including teachers, educational experts, and policy-makers. The National Core Curriculum provides the foundation, the principles, and the broad outlines for local curricula, which are drafted separately in each municipality. This proceeding allows for local needs and perspectives to be taken into account in school education.

According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) the Finnish basic education has a mission to provide 'equal opportunities for all citizens to high-quality education and training' and emphasizes education's role as 'a key to competitiveness and well-being of the society'. To this end, Finnish national education has three main functions that are the pedagogical, societal, and cultural functions (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). The pedagogical function of basic education is to offer students opportunities to develop their skills in versatile ways, and to strengthen students' positive identity as individuals, learners, and community members. The societal function of basic education is to promote equality and justice and to help prevent inequality and exclusion. The cultural function of basic education is to foster cultural awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage and to support students with their own identity construction. Based on these functions, the Finnish Core Curriculum outlines different sets of individual strengths and social competences as well as awareness and openness to the outside world as the fundamental qualifications and objectives basic education is purported to promote. 'Basic education is to support pupils' growth towards humanity and ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with the knowledge and skills

needed in life' (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017). The Finnish education system is thus based on objectives that recognize education as a transformative force for both individual and societal developments.

The pedagogical, societal, and cultural functions compose the foundation and dictate the purpose of national education in Finland. In order to discuss how these functions are translated within the basic education at institutional level, the concept of institutional habitus (Reay et al. 2001) is deployed. 'Institution' here refers to national education as the unit of analysis and an entity that encompasses the deeply embedded values, relational issues and priorities that inform practice and normalize particular knowledge and understandings within an educational realm (Jabal 2014; Benjamin and Alemanji 2017; Thomas 2002). Institutional habitus stems from three distinct, but intertwining elements, which are (1) the educational status, (2) the ethos, and (3) the organizational practices of education. First, the educational status refers to the contents of the national curriculum, which steer the overall direction and educational objectives of individual schools. Second, the ethos i.e., the cultural and expressive characteristics disclose the general ethos of national education that consists of the assumptions, attitudes and expected outcomes that are embedded in it. Third, the organizational practices indicate the broad organization of the schools including their approach to pedagogy and assessment. Together these three elements create a space, where certain types of identifications and experiences are encouraged and solicited, and certain values, language, conduct, and knowledge are regarded as legitimate and preferred. It is relevant to examine these elements on a national level, as they reveal the national hegemonies embedded in education and thus make explicit the hidden curriculum that governs alongside the official national curriculum (Jackson 1968). As discussed earlier, hidden curriculum is acknowledged as central in the socialization of pupils and in preparing them to be involved in the life of the societal public sphere. For identifying how the Finnish education system reflects and reproduces the core values that the society uses for supporting national cohesion, and how religions and worldviews are included in this process, we will address the three elements of educational status, the ethos, and organizational practices in the Finnish context next.

## 6. The Core Values and Hegemonies of Institutional Habitus in Finnish Education

### 6.1. Educational Status

According to the National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014), Finnish basic education is grounded on the principle that all people, regardless of their ethnic origins, age, abilities, wealth or place of residence, must have equal access to free high-quality education. The core values of basic education highlight the principles of humanity, equality, and democracy. Each individual is considered as unique and worthy of respect:

"Each pupil has the right to grow into his or her full potential as a human being and a member of society. To achieve this, the pupils need encouragement and individual support as well as experiences of being heard and valued in the school community. They also need to feel that the community cares about their learning and well-being. Equally important are experiences of participation and opportunities for working together with others to advance the functioning and welfare of the community". (p. 26)

The national curriculum formulates that in order to develop a positive identity, the pupils must be supported and guided in different domains of social capital (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014, pp. 13, 315). In Finland, the pupils are entitled and encouraged to learn about their cultural heritage and traditions and those of the others, including the right to develop their proficiency in their home language. Multilingualism is seen as normative in a plural society and as an asset to intercultural understanding enabling engaged citizenship and participation. As language is an essential element of identity, mother tongue lessons are provided for those children who speak another language than Finnish or Swedish at home. The national curriculum also acknowledges the role of religion as a part of identity. The knowledge of one's own and other

religions is viewed as an important element in identity construction and central for understanding societal diversity and the dialogues around religions and worldviews, and their role in the history of mankind. By international standards, the educational status of the Finnish school system is thus special as it has a unique approach on religious and secular ethics education as part of the curricular content. In the following, we will briefly describe the outlines of religious education in Finland as it relates to the topic of this paper.

Religious education, or its alternative, secular ethics education, are compulsory subjects in the national education in Finland and they are organized according to the religious denomination of the pupils (see e.g., [Kallioniemi and Ubani 2016](#)). As religious education has a long history in the Finnish school system and as the vast majority of the citizens have been members of the Evangelic–Lutheran church, RE lessons have been relatively easy to organize as part of the lesson pool equal to biology or mathematics, for example. However, the diversifying social fabric has challenged the status quo regarding the organization of RE lessons as currently schools need to offer religious education for any religious orientation that has a curriculum and that is approved by the National Agency for Education, in cases where there are a minimum of three students within the school district who belong to this religious community and want to have RE according to it. Currently there are 13 approved curricula for religious education in Finland, but not all of them are actively taught in schools. All RE curricula share the same main objectives of increasing the students' knowledge of their 'own' religion, the religions in the world and the ethics of a good life. However, the actual study contents are different from one religion to another, and therefore students are divided into different learning groups during RE lessons. Notwithstanding, all teaching in RE is defined as nonconfessional and it is not allowed to carry out religious practices, such as praying, in these classes. The pupils who are not members of any religious communities, take part in secular ethics education that also has its own curriculum. New forms of organizing the teaching in more integrative and inclusive way have been developed over the recent years and the way in which religious and secular ethics education should be reorganized has been the topic of several debates in the Finnish public discourses (see [Åhs et al. 2016](#)).

According to the general objectives of religious and secular ethics education, all pupils, regardless of their choice of RE, should thus gain a basic understanding about the major world religions and secular worldviews and the ability to act in a global world where they will encounter people with different beliefs ([Finnish National Agency for Education 2014](#)). However, in addition to the subject specific education, religions and worldviews are included in the general value basis and objectives of all basic education. The national curriculum emphasizes that fruitful collaboration with the pupils' families is based on educators' open-mindedness and respect of the different religions, beliefs and traditions present in the pupils' families (p. 15). Likewise, the curriculum states that schools should act as learning communities where the students collaborate and learn about themselves and of the others by collaborating with people with different types of cultural backgrounds, religious orientations, home languages or worldviews (p. 16).

The educational status of the Finnish system is thus strongly supportive of socialization that does not separate people according to their personal characteristics and affiliations but encourages societal engagement and the feelings of unity in diversity. It delineates the cultural, religious, and linguistic plurality of the individuals as a positive feature for the society. Nominally, the educational status supports the previously mentioned pedagogical, societal and cultural functions of education. However, the true possibilities for societal belongingness and cultural identity construction may be limited because of the powerful presence of the national secular Lutheran hegemony. For example, studies have shown that both educators and pupils show various attitudes regarding the ways in which the religious symbols or customs should be allowed to be represented in schools ([Kuusisto et al. 2017](#)). Also, the ways in which the curricular missions and objectives are understood by individual teachers and turned into pedagogical practices are not necessarily straightforward, as we will discuss further.

## 6.2. Educational Ethos and the Expressive Characteristics of Education

The principles and objectives embedded in the educational status have a strong channeling and guiding influence for the educational ethos. Aligned with the curriculum, the ethos or the expressive characteristics of education comprise of expectations, conduct, attitudes, and assumptions (Reay et al. 2001), subtly conveying messages of ‘who we are’ (Cornbleth 2010, p. 281) and ‘what we want to achieve here’. McLaughlin (2005, pp. 311–12) argues that the ethos of education is an underlying entity that consists of various aspects of educational objectives and practices:

“The influence of an ethos is seen in the shaping of human perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions and the like in a distinctive way, which is implicated in that which is (in some sense) established.”

The ethos of a national school system can be thought of as the aspects of school culture and the value system, which are mediated by the organizational structures, processes, and the educational staff (Smith 2003). In the Finnish context, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) defines the ‘Underlying values of basic education’ to include four main themes that are the respect for the uniqueness and value of each pupil ‘just as he or she is’ (p. 34), to support ‘the pupil’s growth as a human being who strives for truth, goodness, beauty, justice and peace’ (p. 35), to see ‘cultural diversity as a richness’ (p. 36), and to strive towards a ‘sustainable way of living’ (p. 37). This document that is guiding national education is thus built around the ethos of inclusion, recognizing the diversity of the present-day student body, including individuals with disabilities and different medical diagnosis and from various religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural origins as a positive societal feature. However, the way this ethos is mediated to the pupils may take many forms.

It is important to note that despite their efforts for equity and neutrality, education can never be neutral (e.g., Bergdahl and Langmann 2018). For example, the core values of the Finnish education system are founded on the idea of inclusion and equity that recognizes individual differences among the students and aims to respond to these by providing the students with various types of teaching and learning experiences. Examples of these are the previously described forms of language and worldview education that is adapted according to the individuals’ backgrounds. The core values thus aim to support all individuals’ access to the various of forms of capital within the society (Bourdieu 1986) and enhancing their membership within it. However, it is also important to note that the educational system does not have a relativist approach in which it would regard all systems of values as equally acceptable (see also Bergdahl and Langmann 2018). Following from this the teaching and learning content and activities taking place in basic education cannot be tolerant or endorsing towards any types of religious or secular ideologies or values that contradict with the core values of the curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017). Nevertheless this ethos of the Finnish education cannot be imposed by external rules but, in order to make value education meaningful, schools should be places that encourage critical thinking and voicing of various types of opinions and concerns that can then be subjected to critical examination (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014; see also Bergdahl and Langmann 2018).

However, the ways in which these objectives are met in practice requires careful consideration starting from the fact that the teachers themselves are trained according to educational models that are always socially, politically, and historically grounded (Poulter et al. 2015), and this evidently impacts their constructions and perceptions of ‘ideal’ students (Smith 2003). There is thus always a risk that the national social fabric conditions one to see certain groups as the majority representing ‘the normal’ and some others as minority as if having ‘distinct’ identities and values (Poulter et al. 2015, see also De Oliveira Andreotti 2012) or as ‘vulnerable’ (Brunila and Rossi 2018). Bourdieu talks about ‘social order’, which is ‘progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through systems like education that lead to an ‘unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies’ and to ‘a sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 141). Thomas (2002, p. 433) argues that ‘a traditional institutional habitus assumes

that the habitus of the dominant group (i.e., white, male, middle class, able-bodied, etc.) is not only the correct habitus, but treats all students as if they possessed it, and this is reflected in teaching, learning and assessment strategies'. The ethos of education is also expressed through educational expectations schools have regarding their pupils. Teachers' expectations of individuals who fall beyond the dominant group are often different from those reserved for the dominant group, and this has far-reaching impacts on the pupils' self-worth as well as on their future orientations (Brunila et al. 2017). An example of this kind of inadvertent exclusion can be found in the Finnish education context that has been strongly influenced by 'secular Lutheranism' as part of the Finnish culture (Poulter et al. 2015). Apart from certain neighborhoods in the capital area, the ethos in the Finnish schools still considers the 'dominant group' to consist of white, secular Lutheran, middle-class, Finnish-speaking individuals who adhere to traditional Finnishness with its norms, values, and worldviews, as described earlier. The dominant tradition is visible, for example, in the cultural traditions celebrated within schools (Niemi et al. 2014). The identification of societal hegemonies embedded in the educational ethos is relevant for analyzing and developing educational practices, as we will discuss next.

### 6.3. Organisational Practices

The ways in which the core values of education are transmitted into organizational practices varies greatly across countries. In Finland the educational autonomy is high and this becomes visible, for example, in the ways that the Finnish schools have very little standardized tests and there are no school inspections. This means that individual schools are trusted to design their institutional curricula—based on the national and local curricula—allowing for variation according to the local realities, dynamics, and requirements. Individual teachers have great pedagogical autonomy to decide about the methods of teaching and the use of textbooks and other materials. They may also make pedagogical decisions on how to prioritize the contents and objectives defined in the curricula (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017). Teachers are therefore in a central position translating the national agendas into pedagogical practices. The practices include, for example, the choices about the organization of teaching and learning situations, the methods of teaching, and forms of learning and assessment. All of these choices are also central for the ways in which the educational settings support or restrain the students' sense of inclusion in the school community.

This freedom that individual schools and teachers have in implementing the curricula thus also underlines the moral and ethical responsibility of each teacher to be sensitive and critical regarding the values and ideologies that are transmitted to the students as normative. Following the educational ethos, the organizational practices in Finnish schools are set to promote inclusion and well-being of all students but, as described previously, this bears a risk of teachers remaining blind to practices that are on one hand embracing and normalizing certain identities and worldviews and, on the other hand, 'Othering' towards others (Poulter et al. 2015, see also De Oliveira Andreotti 2012). The sensitivity and the abilities of critical thinking and perspective taking of individual teachers become especially central if any kinds of prevention strategies are to be implemented in the Finnish educational system. As the implementation of the National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Radicalisation and Extremism (Ministry of the Interior 2016) is to be done at the level of organizational practices of the institutions, more specifically within the classroom settings, it demarcates the teachers as fundamentally responsible for the national prevention duty. Contrary to many other countries (see e.g., Davies 2016; Ghosh et al. 2016), the current Action Plan does not present notable suggestions for educational practices, but it merely highlights some of the general objectives that are already stated in the national core curriculum for basic education. These include especially the need to support students' media literacy skills and raising their awareness about different types of religions and ideologies in the world.

Whereas the absence of clear guidelines is aligned with the institutional habitus of the Finnish education system that highlights trust and pedagogical freedom, it also makes it imperative for educators to be critical and observant of the implicit hegemonies delimiting the values, worldviews

and identities that are transmitted through education as normative and how these may contribute to the growing social polarization and the upsurge of extreme ideologies at any level of the society. These concern especially the ways in which the religious or national 'others' are addressed from the level of the core functions of national education, through the National Action Plan (Ministry of the Interior 2016), to the level of organizational practices in individual classrooms (see also Mäkinen 2017). However, as the National Action Plan currently remains a nonbinding political document its impact on the everyday pedagogical practices in educational institutions remains unknown. Further, according to our evaluation, the core prevention work does not seem to be aimed towards preventing extremism, but rather on the fostering of inclusion and well-being of all individuals within the school community, which the schools should be committed in doing in any case.

## 7. The Institutional Habitus of Counter-Extremism in Finnish Education

In terms of the pedagogical, societal, and cultural functions of national education, we have identified that the institutional habitus of the Finnish National Action Plan (Ministry of the Interior 2016) and the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) bring forward convergent approaches related to the general ethos and the underlying objectives and values that education is purported to promote. At the core of both documents is the idea of providing the individual with knowledge about various ways of thinking, and experiences of participation and belonging as a pathway to constructive citizenship. Both documents are also strongly founded on the idea of supporting the experiences of social inclusion and avoiding exclusion. However, as our analysis of the institutional habitus of Finnish national education is brought forward, there are numerous ways and issues that may prevent an individual from feeling belongingness and, instead, expose them to feelings of otherness (see also Poulter et al. 2015). Despite the noble aims to respect and nurture the cultural and religious identities of each pupil within basic education, it is likely that in reality the powerful national hegemonies and the persistent ideal of Finnishness dictate and delimit the extent to which diversity is tolerated and fostered in the Finnish society.

As we have concluded earlier, there are many issues related to ethics and power in the drafting of national strategies for preventing extremisms and radicalization. For example, regarding the Finnish National Action Plan (Ministry of the Interior 2016), it is noteworthy that despite the fact that Finland has experienced several violent attacks from the 1990s onwards, including school shootings (see Malkki and Sallamaa 2018), the publication timeline (first version published in 2012) of this plan coincides with an increased media attention on terrorism and extremist ideologies as well as with the growing intake of refugees and asylum seekers in Finland. Accordingly, majority of the threats mentioned in the document relate to jihadism, and issues related to illegal immigration are also emphasized. Thus, the document seems to highlight some forms of extremism as more urgent and threatening than the others; a national hegemony, in which a fear for the 'other' (see also Casanova 2009; Miah 2017) is predominantly stronger than the fear for, for example, nationalistic right-wing nationalistic movements. The concern, for example, over white-supremacy, was mentioned only under the categories of hate speech and hate crimes (Ministry of the Interior 2016), despite of the fact that right-wing nationalism has much longer roots and platforms in Finland than religious terrorism (e.g., Malkki and Sallamaa 2018; Mäkinen 2017). The ways in which these concerns and the underlying understandings about national and religious hegemonies are addressed in education is central the imaginaries about 'us' and 'them' are easily turn into hierarchical and exclusive categories such as 'the Finns' and 'the immigrants' or 'Finnishness' and 'Islam' where the value of the person is relative to one or several of their social labels (see also Mäkinen 2017). As the current version of the Finnish National Action Plan does not bind the schools to any specific procedures or actions, its value can be measured more in terms of a national statement than a preventive educational program.

In the likely situation that Finland is to draft an official national strategy for preventing radicalization within education, the issues related to ethics and power need to be considered and analyzed carefully. One ethical point to consider is who has the legitimate authority and expertise to

design such strategies? We argue that if the liability of prevention of radicalization is laid on educational institutions, the strategies should be created in an interdisciplinary collaboration between experts from educational sciences, decision-makers, and school headmasters, also incorporating the perspectives of the young people to whom these strategies are aimed at. Individual teachers, limited by their personal resources, but bearing the final duty of the preventive practices, need to be offered adequate training and opportunities for professional development. The vague guidelines about the needed competencies promoted in the National Action Plan (Ministry of the Interior 2016) need to be translated into tangible pedagogical practices. As we have stated, the phenomena related to radicalization and extremisms are highly contexts-specific, so all training offered should be research-based and contextualized, including the terminology used to discuss the topics. As mere translation of existing documents from other contexts does not suffice, careful analysis and reflection of the Finnish educational institutional habitus and the hierarchies related to the depictions of nationality and religion should thus precede any such proceedings.

## 8. Conclusions

Related to the prevention of violent extremism, education has been increasingly faced with simultaneous tasks to support the cohesion of the community in which it operates, as well as to empower the individual to act critically in that same community. As the elements underlying national education differ from one society to another, it is important to recognize the context-specific features before drafting any specific educational strategies for the prevention of extremism (see e.g., Ghosh et al. 2016). In this paper, we have taken a closer look at the institutional habitus of the educational system in Finland in regards to its role in preventing violent extremism. We have found analyzing the elements of institutional habitus to be a comprehensive way to describe the realities of national education at institutional level and to discuss the hegemonies that are embedded in it. An understanding of these dimensions is central when framing education as a context for preventing extremisms, as they depict the realities in which prevention is to take place.

We argue that the understanding of the why and how about the ways in which national education could or should be harnessed to address ideological extremism is a significant national statement that conveys messages on the acceptability and legitimacy of particular values, identities, religions, and worldviews within the school and the wider society. It is not insignificant which ideologies are seen as a threat for the security or the cohesion of the nation, as this understanding contributes to the national ideological hegemonies and an inadvertent exclusion of some groups and individuals from the social sphere. Action plans and strategies for preventing extremism can, de facto, be considered as national 'hidden curricula' for socialization and nation-building that are strongly founded in feelings of belongingness and safety. Related to this it is also important to pay attention to the ways in which education produces its own self-understanding about its role regarding the prevention of violent extremism. To define whether the aim of education is to prevent and go against some orientations or to support and move towards some others is central when policies are turned into pedagogical practices.

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