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**To cite this article:** Martin M. Sjøen (2024) Engaging with the Elusiveness of Violent Extremism in Norwegian Schools – The Promise and Potential of Agonistic Listening, British Journal of Educational Studies, 72:3, 321-340, DOI: [10.1080/00071005.2023.2251151](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2251151)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2251151>



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Published online: 11 Sep 2023.



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## Engaging with the Elusiveness of Violent Extremism in Norwegian Schools – The Promise and Potential of Agonistic Listening

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*ABSTRACT: The issue of violent extremism has given rise to new policy debates in Norway. A key limitation of these debates, often grounded in naïve assumptions about the peacebuilding effect of education, is the downplay of emotions and dissent in democratic engagement. This article analyses how selected educators in Norway describe encountering and engaging with extremist students for educational interventional purposes. Previous research suggests that educational efforts to counter violent extremism can be exclusionary from the perspective of target audiences. In contrast, this study draws on agonistic pluralism to provide an alternative to understand educational approaches that may help students disengage from violent extremism. The findings show that the selected educators argue the importance of trust, support and tolerance when engaging with extremist students. For these professionals, education should not downplay radical or extreme emotions but rather place them at the centre of educational engagement. Furthermore, it is suggested that educators' empathic engagement may open the path for young people to disengage from violent extremism.*

*Keywords: violent extremism, education, security, agonistic pluralism, empathic engagement*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, extremism and terrorism have been identified as major threats to democracy. As testified by growing concerns about marauding violence, the European continent is confronted with the expectation that terrorist threats might arise again (Panjwani *et al.*, 2018). Further interwoven in these concerns is the relative success of populist and extremist political parties and the fact that trust in democracy has steeply declined in many European countries (Foa and Mounk, 2016). In this regard, European societies appear ill-prepared to confront the challenges increasingly understood as driving extremism and terrorism (Triandafyllidou and McNeil-Willson, 2023).

At the same time, educational systems are considered promising institutions for preventing violent extremism, with the role of teachers seeming especially relevant

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

ISSN 0007-1005 (print)/ISSN 1467-8527 (online)

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2251151>

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(Jerome and Elwick, 2019). The assumption that education can be an effective barrier against extremism and violence is not particularly new. However, since the mid-2000s, there has been a proliferation of policy that seeks to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE) across much of Northwestern Europe (Sjøen, 2021; Svennevig *et al.*, 2021). These policy ideas have been widely discussed by scholars who have provided important research insights across the European continent including, but not limited to, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden (Benjamin *et al.*, 2023; Busher *et al.*, 2017; Gansewig, 2023; Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021; Jerome and Elwick, 2019; Mattsson, 2018; Sieckelink *et al.*, 2015; Sjøen, 2020). As noted by Jerome and Elwick (2019), discussions on P/CVE issues span both policy-relevant responses for preventing extremism and more critical analysis of the intersecting of security governance in education, which should be seen as an analytical distinction rather than a scientific demarcation.

The point of departure of this article is to shed light on the relationship between education and extremism. More specifically, the focal point is to analyse how selected educators in Norway engage with extremist students for interventional purposes. Violent extremism is both a historical and contemporary problem in Norway (Bjørge, 1997; Hardy, 2019). Since the 1980s, Norway has faced a diverse threat of right-wing extremism, which, along with the more recent phenomenon of Islamist foreign fighters, makes for an important case study on extreme violence. An examination of the international literature reveals that extremist students often narrate an educational experience characterised by exclusion and stigmatisation (Sjøen and Jore, 2019). These findings may be transferable to Norway, as research indicates that some students who adhere to extremist beliefs may be victims of structural injustice (Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021). There are good reasons to believe that these experiences may harden extremist attitudes. As such, it is almost trite to state that school is an arena in which extremist students risk becoming further disconnected from society.

This study draws on interviews with educators in Norway to highlight their engagement with extremism. The research participants were sampled based on having encountered and engaged with students who were members of nationalist and neo-Nazi groups, as well as individuals who travelled to Syria as foreign fighters. The educational narratives reported on in this study concerned both successful and unsuccessful educational interventions. The study was guided by the research question: How do educators describe their encounters and engagement with extremist students?

To explicate the possibilities of engaging with extremism in school, the article applies the theory of agonistic pluralism (agonism) (Mouffe, 1999). Agonism encourages the widening of educational contexts to include students who are viewed as too extreme to take part in democratic engagement. The usefulness of agonism is indicated by the fact that findings from this study highlight how educators should not downplay extreme emotions but place them at the centre of democratic engagement. In particular, the theory of agonism can

guide our understanding by stressing the importance of tolerance and supportive relations when educators engage with extremist students. While agonistic pluralism has gained traction in the literature on extremism and education (Castellví *et al.*, 2022; Ercan, 2017; Zembylas, 2021), this study contributes to this discussion by emphasising inclusive approaches to engaging with extremists in Norwegian schools. In doing so, the study provides unique insights into encounters and engagement with extremist students for preventive purposes.

## 2. EXTREMISM AND EDUCATION

Recently, the relationship between education and extremism has attracted interest across educational policy, research and practice. Among the implications of this attention has been the establishing of domestic multi-agency programmes for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), in which educators are considered important actors and enactors of security governance. England, as part of the United Kingdom, a former member state of the European Union, was the first country to implement a national P/CVE programme (HM Government, 2006). This programme was introduced by the Labour government in 2006 as part of the wider domestic counterterrorist strategy (Thomas, 2016). Since then, the duty on public-sector professionals to prevent violent extremism in England has become enshrined in the law section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (Home Office, 2015). Commonly referred to as the ‘Prevent Duty’, every tier of the English educational establishment is now instructed to prevent young people from being drawn into terrorism. What is more, many countries have followed similar policy paths, as Prevent-inspired P/CVE programmes and guidelines have been introduced across the European continent (Sjøen, 2021).

A standard assumption in the overall P/CVE policy field is that education can be a powerful barrier against extremism and violence (Jerome and Elwick, 2019). For instance, much has been written on the potential of democratic citizenship and human-rights education (Aly *et al.*, 2014; Svennevig *et al.*, 2021). Attention has also been focused on education as an agent for socialisation (Mattsson and Johansson, 2020), social mobility (Mattsson, 2021) and subject agency (Sieckelinck *et al.*, 2015; van San *et al.*, 2013). Because of the purported prevalence of the adolescent demographic in recruitment into extremist milieus, safeguarding students is another subject that has received considerable attention (Davies, 2008, 2014).

However, with respect to expectations placed on teachers to safeguard students from extremism, serious questions are raised as to whether P/CVE policies genuinely promote safeguarding or are inclined to permit pre-emptive security governance in schools (O'Donnell, 2017). Another point concerns the assumption that extremism is a youth problem proper, seeing that the average age of joining extremist groups often ranges between 25–30 years (Mattsson, 2021). Closely related, the relationship between education and political violence is complex. In

fact, the literature is inconclusive as to whether education is an efficient barrier against violence and extremism (Sjøen, 2021). That is not to say that educational systems have no bearing on assisting students in their development of democratic attitudes or behaviours. However, involvement in political violence is determined by a host of complex factors on which educational systems have little or no direct impact.

As with the wider critique of P/CVE efforts in European educational systems, the potentially stigmatising impact that security policies can have on educational practice has been the subject of considerable criticism (O'Donnell, 2016). As a case in point, many scholars focus on the negative impact of security governance on youth and education (Mattsson, 2018; Sieckelinck *et al.*, 2015), as well as on how the Prevent duty and similar policy initiatives have led to a securitisation of Muslim populations in and beyond England (O'Donnell, 2017). This issue predates the global war on terror, as, more than two decades ago, Ezekiel (2002) found that security governance in schools can be stigmatising from the perspectives of extremist young people. Scrutiny is also aimed at how P/CVE efforts are driven by ideological assumptions rather than research-based knowledge (Sjøen and Jore, 2019). Many scholars have warned of how growing security demands can have a chilling effect on educational practice (Davies, 2014; O'Donnell, 2016). However, as noted by Busher and Jerome (2020), there is relatively scarce available empirical evidence with which to evaluate the effects of security governance in education.

This presupposes caution when attempting to draw conclusions from research on the entanglement of securitisation and education. Furthermore, Durodié (2016) suggests that the focus on securitisation might be one-sided, as he argues that security and education exist in a dialectic relationship. As such, the implementation of P/CVE programmes can be understood within the wider notion of 'risk society', where new elements of social life are continuously reorganised as a response to security issues (Sjøen, 2020). Moreover, security governance in education is neither static nor uniform. On this note, Thomas (2020) argues how P/CVE programmes in England have evolved from being based on community-centred resilience to shifting the focus on identifying and safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Related, some argue that safeguarding practices, which is commonly used about the well-being of the student, might entail a greater focus on how to safeguard society from the threat posed by young individuals (Sjøen, 2020). However, although limited research is available on these matters, some studies suggest that educational professionals intervene in extremism processes primarily for the well-being of students (Busher *et al.*, 2017; Mattsson, 2018).

Still, it can be beneficial to look at schools in America as they have been engaged in educational security governance for decades, while also being the subject of more systematic research (Sjøen, 2020). Although political agendas differ greatly between America and Europe, research on security governance in

American schools suggest that it may lead to stigmatisation, suppression and exclusion of minorities (Borum *et al.*, 2010). This resonates with the prevailing criticism of P/CVE programmes in England and across Europe (Mattsson, 2018; O'Donnell, 2017; Sieckelinck *et al.*, 2015; Sjøen and Jore, 2019). Furthermore, research from both England and Norway reveal that educational professionals refer the most cases of concern to relevant authorities (O'Donnell, 2016; Sjøen, 2020). While some authors suggest that a high number of referrals demonstrates the relative success of P/CVE programmes (Shawcross, 2023), others argue that pre-crime security measures may fuel the very extremist elements they aim to counter (van San *et al.*, 2013).

On this note, Davies (2008, p. 1) makes the sobering claim that education is currently doing little to prevent people from joining extremist groups. In contrast to common assumptions, this statement is supported in much of the literature. Different studies have consistently shown that students with extreme convictions tend to narrate an educational background characterised by stigmatisation and exclusion (Cockburn, 2007; Ezekiel, 2002; Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021; Mattsson, 2021; Mattsson and Johansson, 2020; Sieckelinck *et al.*, 2015; Thomas, 2016; van San *et al.*, 2013). It is deeply concerning that students may relate these experiences to developing more cynical views about education and democracy.

This crisis of educational legitimacy extends across a wider set of indicators than previously appreciated, as recent evidence shows that exclusionary experiences can be the subject of social reproduction (Zych and Nasaescu, 2022). As noted by Mattsson (2021), when (former) extremists become parents, they may use their negative experiences to protect their children and help them to escape from democratic education. These narratives highlight how society should not take for granted that schools reduce the risk of violent extremism, as the educational experience can noticeably also add to it.

For Cockburn (2007), this dilemma might be put down to how extremism is seen as a product of irrationality. Cockburn writes that policymakers and practitioners may adhere to an idea that prejudice and extremism arise out of base ignorance and that students will passively accept education to counter this. In such cases, countering extremism in schools may take the route of moralising education. According to Thomas (2016, p. 177), this resembles previous experiences with past anti-racist education in England in which the effects of such approaches were to cause a racialised resentment, a feeling of unfairness, and to drive racist sentiment underground, rather than enable its educational transformation. Similar tendencies are found in the analysis of educationalists' perspectives, textbooks, and curricula in Norway, as issues like racism, nationalism, and extremism are often approached through moralising perspectives in which the social world is divided into an antagonism between 'good' versus 'evil' (Sjøen and Mattsson, 2022). As noted by Zembylas (2021), we should not expect that extremist or racist attitudes can be unlearned through moralising education. It is

therefore important to explore not only how students learn democracy but also how they potentially unlearn and disengage from extremism and racism (Davies, 2014).

### 3. TOLERANCE IN THE FACE OF INTOLERANCE: THE PROMISE OF AGONISM

As shown above, the current entanglement of security and education is characterised by tensions. In tandem with the global embrace of P/CVE efforts as a means of countering extremism, a critique of the preventive strategies based upon it has developed. For O'Donnell (2016), education in its practice must be anti-extremist. At the same time, she questions whether it is appropriate to mobilise educational systems to perform security governance in education. However, another strand to consider is that security governance in schools with its potential exclusionary impacts existed before the advent of the global war on terror (Borum *et al.*, 2010; Davies, 2008). What is not clear is how serious a warning sign this is for the social (re)production of extremism in and beyond education.

For Mouffe (1999), the incapacity to provide alternatives to the expansion of extremism is driven by an over-confidence in liberal democracy. In several of her writings, Mouffe (1999, 2000) explains how European societies struggle to respond to the challenges of extremist elements, since dominant models of democracy overemphasise notions of consensus, rationality and universalistic morality. In particular, deliberative theories, which Mouffe (1999) describes as being 'in vogue', tend to downplay emotions, conflict and identity in the democratic experience. These notions of rationality and universalistic morality chime with the binary construction of terrorism as 'good' versus 'evil', which has come to dominate the European P/CVE policy field (Sjøen and Mattsson, 2022).

Although Mouffe centres many of her discussions on the increase of right-wing populism in European politics, a case can be made that this development is a much wider phenomenon, in terms of both political orientation and geographical placement. In fact, populism and extremism seem to be mainstreamed across the board (Panjwani *et al.*, 2018). There is a tendency in both advanced and emerging democracies for young citizens to express less of an attachment to democratic norms. Rather, they increasingly endorse single-issue movements, vote for populist candidates and support anti-system parties (Foa and Mounk, 2016, p. 6). Democracy appears to be challenged in some of the most politically stable regions of the world. While there are different versions of the 'state of democracy', the trend towards openness to non-democratic alternatives is especially strong among young citizens (Foa and Mounk, 2016). Moreover, there are concerns about the symbiosis between different forms of extremism where conflictual identities amplify each other. Crawford *et al.* (2018) categorise this as 'cumulative extremism', where untamed conflicts feed into one another,



potentially fostering more recruitment into anti-democratic movements. In other words, democracy might be particularly favourable for the development of extremist attitudes among young people.

The mitigating approach that Mouffe (1999) is advocating involves acknowledging that tensions are inherent in democratic life. Mouffe uses the term ‘agonistic pluralism’ to refer to social relations that, while preserving the reality of conflict, do not eliminate passions from the public sphere but mobilise them for democratic ends (Zembylas, 2021). As Wolfowicz *et al.* (2022) write, tolerant discourses can yield a security benefit if they are characterised by civility. This notion of tolerance marks a shift from the dominant trend in liberal democracy, where political conflict is often understood as a battle between enemies (antagonism), rather than as civil relations between adversaries (agonism) (Ercan, 2017).

For Zembylas (2021), agonism can have important implications for classroom practice. One point of convergence is how agonism is inherently relational, extending from social interaction. In this regard, relations are placed at the centre of agonistic processes. Naturally, agonism comes with the chance that conflicts will be exacerbated. Yet, unlike antagonistic interactions, agonism is not about defeating an enemy but about ways of relating in increasingly complex societies. Research suggests that, although extremist students often position themselves outside the social mainstream, they may nevertheless seek supportive relationships in the classroom (Sjøen and Jore, 2019).

On the other hand, recent evaluations of P/CVE efforts indicate that one of the most important intervention factors identified is mutual tolerance. Furthermore, most interventions targeting tolerance do so in education environments (Wolfowicz *et al.*, 2022). Hence, for the purpose of countering extremism, tolerance is an important but not unproblematic factor to be considered. Zembylas (2021) expands on this dilemma by claiming that agonistic approaches should engage with young people’s political affects and emotions in ways that encourage the expression of passionate commitments if they are compatible with norms of civil engagement. In other words, tolerating the intolerant should be understood not as uncritical acceptance of extremist convictions but, rather, as gaining greater understanding of the processes through which young people engage in and disengage from extremism.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to analyse challenges and opportunities when selected educators in Norway encounter and engage with extremist students for educational preventive purposes. This study is part of a larger research project carried out between 2017 and 2022 focusing on the prevention of violent extremism in Norwegian public-sector services. The overall project draws on in-depth interviews with 29 first-line practitioners (19 educators, 7 youth social workers and 3



police officers). This article is limited to the empirical corpus from interviews with eight school staff and the study is guided by the research question: How do educators describe their encounters and engagement with extremist students?

For the purpose of this research question, educators were purposively sampled, which is a form of non-probability selection (Bryman, 2008), based on having encountered and engaged with young extremists, in their professional practice. The search for participants was conducted by contacting schools in municipalities that were impacted by extremist milieus (Sjøen, 2020). Several potential participants were identified and approached, including school staff who had experience with students involved in nationalist and neo-Nazi groups and students who travelled to the Middle East to join ISIS as foreign fighters. In terms of their geographical breakdown, participants were recruited from lower- and upper-secondary schools from four of the five administrative regions in Norway.

In total, eight in-depth interviews were prioritised for this study. At the time of the study, six of the participants were working as teachers (three females, three males), while two were working as principals (two males). All the participants were Norwegian-born and their average age was 48,5 years. In order to ensure anonymity, while also considering the sensitive nature of this research topic, the role, gender, age or location of the research participants is not described in the presentation and discussion of the research findings.

Informed consent was obtained from all the research participants and ethical approval was given by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Five of the participants were interviewed in person and three by telephone. All the participants were interviewed individually, and these interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), and the conversations were audiotaped. Questions revolved around professional encounters and engagement with student extremism, successful and unsuccessful educational interventions, and professional reflections on what may have influenced the different intervening outcomes. A methodological and ethical challenge related to describing these experiences concerns how the participants understand student extremism as a phenomenon. In this study, students extremism is conceptualised as young people who express extreme attitudes, and/or extreme behaviours and/or associate with extremist groups or milieus in Norway.

The study adopts a dynamic qualitative design (Maxwell, 2012) using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts were first analysed with the aim of identifying codes and categories in the textual content. Thereafter, attention was directed to the educators' descriptions of their encounters and engagement with student extremism. This level of interpretation deals with looking beyond the codes and categories by identifying themes about the relationship between educational engagement with student extremism and different intervention outcomes. Thus, meaning-making is

created by analysing how the educational engagement mediates intervention outcomes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Two interrelated themes were identified: the problem of discerning extremist students and the potential for empathic engagement in school.

## 5. FINDINGS: ENGAGING WITH EXTREMISM IN SCHOOL

In the following, the empirical data are presented. Based on the two mentioned themes, this section places attention on the participants' descriptions of their encounters with youth extremism, followed by their reflections on how empathic engaging may counter students' involvement in extremism. Thereafter follows a discussion of the challenges and opportunities when educators interact with extremist students for interventional purposes.

### 5.1. *Encountering the Extreme: The Elusive Nature of Discerning Youth Extremism*

The research participants were initially asked about their thoughts on extremism and young people's engagement in extremism. After explaining their position on the nature of youth extremism, its causes and the ways in which it manifests itself among students, the educators discussed the elusive nature of recognising extremism in school, which is a reoccurring finding in the empirical literature (Mattsson, 2021; van San *et al.*, 2013). Although there is a high degree of heterogeneity in the backgrounds, educational levels and teaching subjects among these participants, a common feature in the interviews was how violent extremism is problematised as a distinct and preventable phenomenon.

As noted in the interviews, young extremists may have an interest in going under the 'radar', which makes identification difficult. Still, there is a common thread in the interviews that discerning extremism is linked to identifying students who oppose accepted social norms and/or display antisocial behaviours. Yet, a significant problem arising out of the interviews was discerning extremism from other antisocial behaviours and implementing appropriate counter-measures. Although P/CVE programmes have been developed to tackle a range of antisocial behaviours (Aly *et al.*, 2014), efficient interventions will usually depend on precise identification of the underlying problem. A female educator spoke of this problem:

Yes, I have had recent cases [of concern]. Sometimes the concern is mainly pedagogically. But it is not always easy to differentiate these issues in practice, especially at an early phase of the radicalisation process. For instance, one of my former students travelled to Syria as a foreign fighter. We [the school staff] did not suspect anything of this extreme nature. He struggled a bit with his academic progress and social inclusion, sure, but nothing out of the ordinary. There was nothing to indicate that we should be worried about him, apart from his learning

difficulties and how he struggled a bit socially. We even had good dialogue with his parents in his process.

As the interviewee explained, the student would later travel to Syria and join ISIS as a foreign fighter, where he eventually lost his life. For this educator, the example above was not so much a case of a failed intervention in youth extremism as an illustration of the difficulty of identifying what is negatively impacting students. This was explained by how the student had attended two schools in which he stayed only one year at each institution. While concern was raised regarding his well-being at each school, the problem was that his teachers only had limited time to build relations to gain insight into his life. As such, this educator seems to reject simplistic tropes associated with P/CVE policies regarding how personality changes are clear signs of who is at risk of radicalisation (O'Donnell, 2016; Svennevig *et al.*, 2021).

Consequently, time appears to be of the essence, as coming to grips with the causes of change in students' well-being requires careful gathering of information (Mattsson, 2018). Furthermore, it emerges through this and other interviews that the challenge of identification is not so much a question of experiencing professional concern; in fact, there are many examples of how these educators describe that concerns about the well-being of students are quite common. Moreover, these educators appear confident and willing to use their professional judgement to assess risk factors commonly associated with violent extremism, while also accepting their fallibility and the fact that their judgements can be wrong.

However, their narratives about professional judgement are also compounded by what are described as greater expectations to demonstrate immediate intervention results. Several interviewees expressed concerns about a larger trend in contemporary teacher professionalism, in which they are expected to act instantly rather than observing carefully, verging on a so-called 'better-safe-than-sorry' intervention approach (O'Donnell, 2017). One educator noted that helping a student disengage from a nationalist network was time-consuming: 'I think we spent the whole duration of his [the student] upper-secondary schooling helping him get ready to leave his racist environment. Even then, I am not sure that we spent enough time'. Several talked about navigating between investing sufficient time to form relations with their students and being asked to be vigilant in identifying risk behaviours and implementing efficient counter-measures, accentuating the tension between approaching radical young people as vulnerable or as suspects (Sieckelinck *et al.*, 2015). This raises several questions, not least what happens if educators make wrong identification:

There was a student who showed a lot of anger and hostility. He was often involved in conflict with his surroundings. He did not conform to rules or expectations in school, and he expressed increasingly extreme opinions about Western and Norwegian culture. This triggered the school's concern about radicalisation, and we were asked to monitor him [...]. After devoting time to him and working closely with him, we discovered that his confrontational and extreme expressions were a consequence of frustration, not hatred against society or radicalisation.

Closely interrelated, distinguishing the 'extreme' from the 'oppositional' is difficult, especially when considering that protest behaviour is common among young people (van San *et al.*, 2013). This is illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

We had a female student who expressed support for ISIS. She started wearing a hijab. She was not particularly religious, perhaps more oppositional in her behaviour [...]. We had to spend considerable time talking to her in a non-confrontational way to understand this.

Another educator talked about creating space for youth protest behaviour, stating that: 'I think that radical expressions among students can also be innovative. For example, to be radical is to challenge norms, and norms need to be challenged.' Thus, the educator rejects the construction of 'radicalisation' as an essentialist concept (O'Donnell, 2016).

While all the educators problematised the elusive nature of discerning extremism, a central contention in these narratives was how they described a responsibility to educate and safeguard students from involvement in extremism, which echoes previous research (Busher *et al.*, 2017; Mattsson, 2018). One noted that: 'Preventing radicalisation for me is the same as preventing youth violence, vandalism, bullying, mental health problems and drug abuse.' Another remarked: 'This is primarily a question about making future generations a little more robust', referring to how formative education should help young people to think critically and act morally. In this sense, interacting with students appeals to these educators, as it draws on their educational language of safeguarding resilience and citizenship (Davies, 2014).

However, the interviewees reveal a tension between their understanding of personal and social factors that may fuel extremist identities among students, from the pre-emptive security logic that underpins much of the P/CVE policy field, which may encourage practitioners to monitor and report suspicious students (O'Donnell, 2017). Several talked about the fact that increased societal focus on terrorism risked legitimising security governance in school:

All this talk about terrorism in school is harmful, to say the least. We should be careful with labelling our students as extremists [...]. A few years ago, we had problems with delinquent behaviour among a small group of students. Rumours started circulating and people were talking about the school as a breeding ground of extremists. Even some teachers seemed scared of coming to work.

Generally, educational scepticism of framing students as threats does not imply that the educators are reluctant to safeguard vulnerable individuals (Mattsson, 2018). To be sure, it emerges from the interviews that the informants narrate a responsibility to help young people who are impacted by marginalisation. However, their responsibility is grounded not in a view of rehabilitating vulnerable individuals but, rather, in interacting with those who are experiencing a dissonance between their expected and experienced level of well-being:

Sometimes we have to consider safeguarding measures outside the ordinary limits of teaching and learning. However, we should be careful not to label students as being different, in a stigmatising way. If we do, then we can add more fuel to the problem. This is the risk when we talk about radicalisation and how to detect radicalised students in school.

To summarise, the interviewed educators recognise a professional responsibility to prevent students from engaging in antisocial behaviours, including extremism. However, determining whether a concern is genuinely about extremism and arriving at a convincing conclusion of how to mitigate underlying causes is difficult. Framing young people as a threat object causes apprehension among the educators, not least because increased pressure on educators to be vigilant can obstruct their ability to meaningfully interact with students.

### *5.2. Empathic Engagement Through Agonistic Listening*

There is a strong professional commitment among the interviewees to counter violent extremism by educating and safeguarding students towards democratic resilience. In particular, the educators believe that relational support and social inclusion are key factors of resilience against extremism, which mirrors previous findings in the literature (Sjøen and Jore, 2019). Yet, several problematised that, while promoting inclusion and support are key to their professional responsibility, extremism is also a product of structural reasons that lie beyond the ordinary confines of education.

What can be done in school is inclusion and emotional support. With inclusion, you may counteract some of the negative consequences that young people experience. But many problems are not fixable in school: poverty, inequality, racism and so on. Inclusion in school may relieve frustration, but I don't think it necessarily removes the underlying problem [...] We must be realistic about what education can and can't do.

Discussions on the social expectations versus educational realities were lengthy in the interviews, as several were critical of the assumption that education can counterweigh structural problems. Some educators made for more reflexive attempts on the negative role of educational experience in exacerbating social, economic and political grievances:

How would you feel, as a Muslim, if the Middle East is brought up in the classroom when the subject matter is war and violence [...] For some students, learning about freedom of speech is done by talking about Mohammed caricatures; learning about gender equality is done by talking about wearing a hijab; learning about democracy is done by talking about suppressive Islamic regimes [...] Can you imagine when your background is constantly used as an entrance to learn about something negative?

This statement is indicative of a wider problem, which is how educators are expected to create social inclusion, whilst knowing that education can be another context in which structural injustice is manifested (Thomas, 2016). Yet, as noted, perhaps ironically, by another educator: 'being expected to solve world problems is much better than being blamed for them'.

On the other hand, while education may have a limited impact on structural problems, the educational experience may help young people tackle the embodiment of structural injustice (Davies, 2008), as explained by a female educator regarding her engagement with two young Muslim students:

There were these two boys from Syria in my class. They rarely spoke in class, and they reflected a general state of resignation or indifference towards school and society [...] I was teaching about terrorism but, instead of talking about 9/11, ISIS, the Taliban and so on, I decided to talk about Norway's role in the war on terror [...] So, we talked about Norway's bombing in Libya, and we also talked about Guantanamo Bay, and then we talked about Afghanistan being invaded by foreign countries. I simply changed the format, and the two boys became very engaged in the classroom.

This interviewee went on to describe how she was later approached by the two Syrian students. The two young men stated that this was the first time that they had been exposed to teaching about terrorism where the narrative was how Muslims could also be victims of violence. Security discourses are often rooted in absolutism, as if they have a singular meaning that cannot be contested (Davies, 2008). In this example, the educator used multiple perspectives in her teaching, which served to critique the dominant framing of Western state-centred terrorism. Yet, as she explained, her pedagogical choice was not only a question of exposing students to new information or knowledge about terrorism; rather, she explained that it was a question of challenging stereotypes that can help students towards making sense of the range of social, cultural and emotional experiences that impact them.

In another example, one that reflects an unsuccessful attempt to engage in and counter violent extremism, one educator reflected on his experience with a student who would later become a high-ranking member of a Norwegian neo-Nazi group:

Our [the school staff] first mistake in this situation was to try and counter his extreme position with our presumed correct knowledge. The problem was, as we later experienced, not that he lacked knowledge. He was, to be sure, a very

knowledgeable student. What we failed to do was to recognise his feelings and his background [...] Looking back at this situation, I think we thought of him as a product of indoctrination and not a person who was able to form his own ideas [...] Perhaps we viewed him this way to excuse our own shortcomings.

This educator expanded upon the trajectory of his student, which he explained was a story of how the young man would increasingly be disconnected from his social surroundings. In particular, the student in question would eventually be the victim of exclusionary educational practices, these being isolation, bullying and ridicule from fellow students in school. Thus, the school staff failed to provide him with a safe educational environment, which is considered a risk factor for developing support for extremist views (Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021).

The question then arises as to how educators can create space for educational engagement that acknowledges the range of issues that affect extremist students' lives (Mattsson, 2021). A key issue in the interviews was how the educators talked about the need to use school to build trust to help students deal with cognitive and emotional uncertainty, as well as to allow for ideas to be expressed and scrutinised through inclusive educational environments. As one educator noted when describing whether students with xenophobic attitudes should be allowed to voice their feelings and views in classroom discussions:

Every day, I risk saying something that could offend students, but I think it is my ability to handle controversial situations that determines whether we can have a meaningful discussion about it.

This educator went on to explain that some mistakes are inevitable in the classroom because of the complexity of human interaction. On the other hand, if educators place too many restrictions on what is allowed to be expressed, the danger is that extremist students will withdraw from discussions altogether and participate in unmonitored discussions elsewhere in society (Mattsson, 2021). As testified by the relative success of alternative communicative platforms in society, one educator noted that: 'I feel a lot safer knowing that there is an extremist student in my classroom, than not knowing where he is.'

A common feature in the interviews was that failure to acknowledge the feelings of extremist students or attempts to moralise 'irrational' views should be avoided:

I have had several experiences, when I was concerned that students are engaging in either racist views or extreme religious mindsets, in which the underlying problem is related to young people who are experiencing some form of deprivation. In addition, they may struggle to find their place in the world. The last thing these students need is for the school to point the finger and instruct them on what they should or should not be.

The above excerpt is related to a situation in which an educator helped a young right-wing extremist disengage from a skinhead group. In what was a lengthy



process of encouraging the young man to leave his extremist milieu, what seemed to work in the end was described as ‘meeting his hatred with compassion and trust’. As succinctly explained by another educator: ‘You would be surprised by how far you can get with simply listening to them’, referring to students who express extreme opinions in school. This comment was expanded by the following description:

In my experience, the students who express the most extreme opinions are also the ones who are in greatest need of support and care [...] A good starting point is to recognise the young person in front of you.

Once again, the important point that needs to be considered is that extremist attitudes are not a question of ignorance that can be resolved by teaching students the ‘right’ knowledge (Zembylas, 2021). Rather than moral condemnation, it is possible to envision that educators offer their students opportunities to voice their beliefs and express their passions in school (van San *et al.*, 2013). According to the interviewees, the potential of education lies in recognising students as subjects and creating conditions for empathic relationships with them.

To summarise, the educators view themselves as important actors in helping young people to unlearn and disengage from violent extremism. To be sure, countering extremism is difficult and time-consuming, yet these educators show no reluctance in accepting responsibility to engage with this task. Empathic engagement lies at the heart of their engagement, as they narrate the need to genuinely listen to the needs and beliefs of young people. Even when describing unsuccessful attempts to counter extremism, the problem is rarely that of not being vigilant enough but, rather, a question of not interacting with students on a human level or listening to their expressed needs and emotions.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Recent years have seen a rise in scholarly discussions on the entanglement of security governance in European schools. Unfortunately, so far, policy answers to how education can help students unlearn or disengage from extremism seems inadequate (Davies, 2008; Thomas, 2016). One possible explanation for this is how educational P/CVE programmes are often aimed at preventing individuals from being drawn into extremism, with less attention focused on how to counter those who are already extremists (Wolfowicz *et al.*, 2022).

This study has sought to explore the relationship between education and extremism in Norway. In doing so, attention has been aimed at how educators in Norway describe their encounters and engagement with extremist students. The low number of research participants (N=8), the use of purposive sampling and the subjective nature of this study restrict the generality of any findings.

Furthermore, this study relies solely on the narratives of educators, meaning that no former or current student was interviewed for these research purposes.

Still, there are many reasons why a study of this calibre should be undertaken. Firstly, Norway is an important research case, having endured a long history of extremist violence (Bjørge, 1997; Hardy, 2019), while also being the scene of a prolific production of policy initiatives for P/CVE efforts in education (Sjøen and Mattsson, 2022). Additionally, research in Norway indicates that students who suffer from structural inequalities may also show the strongest support for defending the use of extreme violence (Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021).

There can be notable exceptions, of course, yet the dissatisfaction narrated by many extremist students may extend across a wider set of indicators than previously acknowledged. As Zembylas (2021) writes, exclusionary experiences can also be relevant to students who merely express oppositional ideas, as opposition and reluctance to conform to dominant norms can lead to being suspected of siding with extremists. This is where the theory of agonistic pluralism can be of relevance (Ercan, 2017). Findings from this study indicate that education may have an interventional potential that has not yet been put into action. The analysis indicates that it is possible to go beyond the stigmatising and exclusionary practices often narrated by extremist students, as responses offered in this study reveal the importance of engaging with students by establishing trusting relations. As such, agonistic pluralism has helped advance our understanding of how educators' empathic engagement can contribute to counter students' involvement in extremism by the means of inclusion. Moreover, patience and perseverance, which lies at the core of agonistic tolerance (Ercan, 2017), may improve the precision of identifying and discerning youth extremism from other anti-social behaviours.

While there is no guarantee that educators will be able to identify and discern the elusiveness that is violent extremism, the sentiments expressed by the participants suggest the need to safeguard the dignity and well-being of all students, including those who are deemed intolerant or extreme. In particular, preventing disenfranchisement and humiliation, by establishing inclusive educational environments, is described as crucial in helping students unlearn or disengage from extremism. O'Donnell (2016, p. 65) describes how a clear set of ethical principles must underpin education. After all, educators, as a rule, cannot pick their students; rather, they must accept everyone in their classroom. While there is little systematic evidence on education countering extremism, there are indications that tolerance and support are promising factors for this purpose (Wolfowicz *et al.*, 2022).

The implications of this study for teaching are that educational professionals should engage with extremist students with tolerance and support, as the interviewees uphold the need to create space for inclusion in educational environments. While this understanding is present across current curricular and security policy reforms in Norway, empirical research suggests that extremist students often feel excluded, stigmatised and even ridiculed in the

educational system (Haugstvedt and Sjøen, 2021; Sjøen and Jore, 2019). To counterweigh these narratives, findings from this study suggests that a sensible place to start is to appreciate extremist students' emotions and identities. As noted by Mouffe (2000), failure to recognise emotions and identities is considered to exacerbate rather than to reduce the risk of extremism. Democratic spheres demand a certain space for dissent, and this dissent can perhaps be tamed within the context of civil engagement (Zembylas, 2021). Moreover, in pluralistic societies, conflicts tend to emanate from deep identity differences, accentuating the need to empathically engage with students through civil discourses.

Having said that, providing educational outlets for passions and political dissent requires affective relations. However, as Mouffe (2000) argues, extremist groups are sometimes the only ones who mobilise passions in public spheres. This is a crucial point to consider, as evidence suggests that extremist young people seek emotional support and inclusion. On this subject, Cockburn (2007, p. 558) writes that offering:

... empathy and understanding does not condone racist views or behaviour—quite the contrary, it is only when the absolutes of 'black and white' are challenged that true mutual recognition and understanding are brought forward.

Thus, moving beyond the simplistic and binary construction also requires a reduction in moral condemnation of political adversaries (Mouffe, 1999).

Ercan (2017) argues that extremist students may face disadvantages when it comes to complying with the rationality-focused communication style of educational deliberations. According to the educational professionals in this study, this should not be seen as a reason to exclude students from democratic participation. What needs scrutinising, though, is that any public sphere will be characterised by limits of tolerance towards radical and extremist elements. In fact, engaging with young extremists in school might be considered a beginning of mainstreaming extremism. The Popperian 'paradox of tolerance' asserts that there are boundaries when engaging with intolerance, since the latter may ultimately destroy the former. In this notion, the suppressing of intolerance is required for a tolerant society to exist. The interviewees acknowledge the paradox of tolerance in which they are responsible for safeguarding the dignity of all students and establishing norms of inclusive education.

Still, according to the interviewees, encountering intolerance with patience and tolerance makes conflict transformation in education tenable. This can be facilitated by emphasising empathic engagement with extremist youth. Ercan (2017, p. 16) describes this as shifting the focus from 'rational expression' to 'agonistic listening', which does not seek to overcome conflict but, rather, serves to foreground it. The notion of creating inclusive space in school is elementary; after all, this is what educators should be providing for their students, regardless of any concern about extremism (O'Donnell, 2016).

## 7. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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