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ARTIKEL

Democratic education and the limits of toleration. How to respond to extremism in the classroom

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Samenvatting

Dit artikel bespreekt enkele centrale problemen van een politiek en educatief gezonde manier om met verschillende vormen van extremisme in de context van discussies in het klaslokaal om te gaan. Het artikel geeft een overzicht van de doelen van een (dialogische) conceptie van democratische opvoeding en bespreekt de notie van extremisme zoals die in onderzoek naar extremisme wordt bediscussieerd. Gebaseerd op dit theoretische en normatieve raamwerk wordt de meer praktische vraag geanalyseerd hoe leraren moeten reageren op extremisme in de klas en er worden algemene richtlijnen en strategieën voorgesteld die richtinggevend kunnen zijn. Tenslotte wordt een bezwaar besproken dat veelvuldig naar voren wordt gebracht in het debat over extremisme en de preventie ervan in educatieve contexten. Volgens dit bewaar zijn leraren geneigd een type tweede-orde intolerantie te reproduceren in de vorm van problematische discursieve constructies die zijn gebaseerd op stereotypen en gevestigde socio-politieke hierarchieën als reactie op wat zij waarnemen als extremisme in de klas.

Abstract

This contribution discusses central problems of a politically and educationally sound way of dealing with different forms of extremism in the context of classroom discussions. In order to do so it provides an overview on basic aims of a (dialogical) conception of democratic education as well as on the notion of extremism as it is discussed in extremism research. Based on this theoretical and normative framework the more practical question how teachers shall respond to extremism in classroom discussions

is analysed and general guidelines and strategies are proposed that can provide orientation for teachers. Finally, a common objection is discussed, which is brought forward in the debate about extremism and its prevention in educational contexts. According to this objection teachers are prone to reproduce a type of second-order intolerance in the form of problematic discursive constructions, which are based on stereotypes and established socio-political hierarchies, when dealing with what they perceive as extremism in the classroom.

Keywords: extremism, democratic education, toleration, intolerance, racism

1. Introduction

How should teachers react to extremism in the classroom? What should they do when students voice extremist positions that radically question the validity of basic principles and values of liberal democracies? Should they openly discuss such positions or should they silence students who defend such positions? And how should they deal with the problem that by classifying certain statements and views as 'extremist' they may reproduce questionable discourses (e.g., about Islam) that express racist stereotypes and reify socio-political hierarchies?

These issues and challenges, which are certainly not new, have received considerable attention recently in academic debates and in the wider public, both due to the rise of right-wing movements and parties in several European countries as well as due to the perceived and real threat of different forms of religiously motivated forms of extremism in liberal democracies. This contribution discusses these and related questions of a politically and educationally sound way of dealing with different forms of extremism in the context of classroom discussions.

In order to do so I will *first* provide an overview of basic aims of a (dialogical) conception of democratic education as a form of education for tolerance[1] and of the prevention of extremism. I will argue that the limits of toleration are identical with the limits of legitimate controversiality in the classroom and will outline a normative framework that allows us to draw the line between statements, perspectives and doctrines that should or should not be tolerated in educational contexts. Based on this framework, I will

1 In what follows I will use the terms tolerance and toleration interchangeably.

secondly deal with the question of how we should define extremism. By drawing on some of the results of extremism research, I will reconstruct shared features of different types of extremism and show why they are problematic from a political and educational point of view. *Third*, I will discuss the practical normative question of how teachers should respond to extremism in classroom discussions. I will argue that – given the complexity of pedagogical constellations more generally and of the multiple and varying causes of extremism in particular – there can certainly be no one-size-fits all approach in dealing with extremism. Even though in the end it is the teacher who has to decide on individual cases based on her professional power of judgement, it is nevertheless possible to formulate general guidelines and strategies that can provide orientation for a pedagogically and politically sound response to extremism. *Fourth*, I will discuss a common objection, which is brought forward in the debate about extremism and its prevention in educational contexts. According to this objection teachers are prone to reproduce a type of second-order intolerance in the form of problematic discursive constructions, which are based on stereotypes and established socio-political hierarchies, when dealing with what they perceive as extremism in the classroom.[2]

2. Democratic education, controversial issues and the limits of toleration

Democratic education can be understood as the initiation into basic values, norms and practices that are conducive for the intergenerational reproduction of liberal democracies. Among the central values that are constitutive of democratic education are the acceptance of the validity of basic liberal and democratic principles and procedures (such as basic human rights, the rule of law, pluralism, division of powers). Central aims of democratic education are, among others, personal and political autonomy as the capacity and willingness to critically question one's inherited convictions and perspectives as well as the capacity to participate in public discussions in an informed and reasonable way. This presupposes that students have sufficient knowledge about the (political) world (e.g., basic knowledge about political processes and institutions in a liberal democracy) and that they cultivate

2 I would like to thank Douglas Yacek, Doret de Ruyter and Agnes Tellings for their helpful comments as well as Quassim Cassam and Christian Thein for sharing their unpublished manuscripts with me.

epistemic and communicative virtues (such as epistemic humility and the willingness to revise their positions in light of countervailing evidence) that allow them to engage in democratic discussions in a sufficiently rational, civil and tolerant way.

Toleration plays a key role in any liberal conception of democratic education. Modern societies are characterized by a diversity of competing and often conflicting conceptions of the good. To deal with this diversity of views that children encounter in their everyday lives in and outside schools in a peaceful and cooperative way, they need to learn and accept that disagreements and dissent concerning ethical, religious and political issues are a permanent feature of life in liberal democracies. This does not necessarily imply that they should cherish 'diversity' in all its different dimensions and facets, but that they learn (within specific limits) to tolerate other viewpoints different from their own. As a democratic virtue and educational aim toleration is based on the ability to reflect on and justify the objections to other people's views and ways of life (objection component of toleration) in light of higher order principles and values (acceptance component of toleration). A student may, for instance, object to the vegan lifestyle of her classmate (objection component), but she can and should nevertheless acknowledge higher order reasons (acceptance component), such as the basic right to pursue such a lifestyle, in order to tolerate this lifestyle. Thus, toleration only becomes necessary when an agent has certain reasons to object to a particular practice, conviction or attitude. If we accept or are indifferent concerning a certain practice there is – at least on the standard definition of toleration – no need for toleration, since there is nothing to object to. The limits of toleration are reached whenever the reasons for objection outweigh the reasons for acceptance.

Intolerance, like tolerance, in a purely descriptive sense can be understood either as an attitude or judgment of individual agents (or, metaphorically speaking, of institutions) or as an individual act, social practice or set of institutionalized rules. A teacher may for instance not tolerate the views of a student (in the sense of a judgment), but may decide not to express her objections openly in the classroom (in terms of acting intolerant), because she has pedagogical reasons to not interfere in the classroom discussion. From a normative perspective, intolerance is not to be understood as a negatively loaded ethical term (even though we tend to use the term in this purely negative way in everyday speech). In some cases, such as grave injustices, intolerance is certainly a legitimate attitude and/or practice. Clear cases of morally objectionable forms of intolerance are, for instance, religiously or politically motivated violence or racism (see, for this problem:

Königs, 2021). How the specific boundaries of legitimate toleration are drawn depends on the specific conception and justification of toleration.

In pluralistic societies there are different conceptions and rationales for toleration more generally as well as for toleration as an educational aim in particular. From a religious point of view, an agent may, for instance, tolerate practice x, because she believes that we are all 'children of god' and therefore should tolerate each other. From the perspective of a respect conception of toleration (Forst, 2013), the justification of toleration and its limits should adhere to the principles of generality and reciprocity. This roughly means that the question of what should be tolerated or not should be dealt with in a way that is mutually acceptable to all agents involved, who cannot reasonably – that is based on the principles of generality and reciprocity – reject the relevant normative claims. According to these principles it would, for instance, be illegitimate to not tolerate particular religious symbols in schools (such as headscarves), but allow others (such as a cross). Less demanding conceptions justify toleration, for instance, on the basis of the harm principle (Cohen, 2014). This means that all actions that are solely or primarily self-regarding and thus do not harm others should be tolerated and all those actions that harm others in a significant way should not be tolerated.

The liberal perfectionist justification of toleration defended here is based on the normative and empirical premise that personal and political autonomy and associated values and principles (e.g., pluralism) are constitutive for a good individual and political life in liberal democracies as well as for a qualitatively good form of (democratic) education. From this perspective the state and its representatives (such as teachers in public schools) should not be entirely neutral with regard to different conceptions of the good, but should be orientated to substantive liberal and democratic values in their decisions to tolerate or not to tolerate certain attitudes or practices. This view is compatible both with a variety of other justifications of toleration as well as of different ways of educating for tolerance (as long as they do not conflict with its foundational principles). In line with the results of empirical tolerance research, according to which intolerance is often correlated with epistemic vices (such as a servile attitude towards perceived epistemic authorities or the adoption of intolerant stereotypes), one way to foster the preconditions of tolerance in children is by cultivating critical thinking and epistemic virtues (Drerup, 2021a). Another way to educate for tolerance focusses on the relation of political emotions and different forms of (in) tolerance (e.g. by fostering the ability to reflectively distance oneself from one's initial emotional impulses; Drerup, 2020).

The approach most relevant for the following argument assumes that the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom is a central means of dialogical democratic education more generally (Drerup, 2021b) as well as of the prevention of extremism and other forms of intolerance in particular (Gebauer, 2016). According to this approach, students can, through the practice of discussion, become better acquainted with the epistemic contours of the issue at hand and with other positions different from their own. This can then lead them to a better understanding of the premises of their own views and, if necessary, to revise them or form a well-founded view in the first place (Hand & Levinson, 2012, p. 617), and to become more tolerant towards other positions (Hess, 2009). Classroom debates about controversial issues and the confrontation with a plurality of views that go along with it can thus trigger individual self-reflection and collective democratic learning processes that enable students to broaden their personal and political perspectives and to learn to better understand and to tolerate other positions. A body of quantitative and qualitative research indeed suggests that in classroom discussions children not only learn to discuss with each other, but also acquire and cultivate a variety of epistemic, communicative and political attitudes, skills and virtues as well as associated bodies of knowledge on which democratic societies depend. These include, for example: knowledge about and interest in political issues, critical thinking skills, motivation for political engagement as well as acceptance of basic democratic values and principles (equality, tolerance, pluralism, etc.) and the ability to deal with conflict in a civil and peaceful way (cf. the overviews in Hess, 2002, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Gronostay, 2019; Pace, 2021).

In order to realize these aims not any type of discussion will do: classroom discussions have to be structured and prepared in an appropriate way (Hess & McAvoy 2015; Drerup 2021b; Pace 2021). This means, among other things, that teachers have to make sure that they and their students have sufficient background knowledge about the relevant topic so that ideally all students can participate, that the rules of discussion are clearly expressed (whether explicitly or implicitly) and adhered to in the classroom, and also that the limits of tolerance are enforced. While teachers may adopt a variety of different roles in classroom discussions (e.g., moderator, devil's advocate), it is a common misconception that they should stay entirely neutral with respect to politically relevant statements of students. This points to a central difference between the way the limits of toleration are conceived in discussions between adults and in asymmetrically structured educational constellations. While in the former *primarily* political principles are adopted to delineate the limits of toleration (for instance to prevent harm from third parties due

to hate speech), in educational constellations political and epistemic criteria have an equally valid and important role to play. This is because children are usually only locally (with respect to certain domains and issues) and not yet globally autonomous agents (that is agents that are able to lead an autonomous life) and they tend to be more epistemically vulnerable than adults (e.g., it is usually easier to manipulate them). Moreover, also the aims of democratic education, such as toleration, have a strong epistemic component. We do not just want children to adhere to basic liberal and democratic principles in their judgements about the political world, we also want them and their contributions to be well-informed and sufficiently rational. While we may certainly also criticize the lack of epistemic quality in political debates between adults, in educational contexts it is from the very start a central *educational* aim that the culture of debate should be both politically and epistemically civilized (that is, sufficiently rational) and that this aim may be cultivated and sometimes also enforced with pedagogical means by the teacher as an epistemic and political authority. This is one of the reasons why the legitimate limits of toleration in educational contexts differ from the limits of toleration in political contexts.

How we should conceive of the limits of toleration in classroom debates is one of the topics discussed in the controversy over controversial issues in philosophy of education, which focusses, among other things, on adequate criteria to delineate issues that should be qualified as genuinely controversial from those that should not. One of the central – though also contested (Warnick & Smith, 2014; Gregory, 2014) – assumptions of the debate is that all those topics that count as controversial should be taught in a non-directive manner, i.e. without a clear intention to compel belief and without the use of educational means adapted to such an aim (such as the use of framing methods or the choice of particular examples to guide the discussion). Controversial issues should be presented as impartially as possible by taking into account a variety of legitimate and adequate perspectives. For all issues that are considered to be non-controversial, directive forms of teaching are generally considered legitimate. Such methods have the "aim of persuading pupils that a matter is settled, a claim true or a standard justified" (Hand, 2020, p. 14). Different criteria have been defended to differentiate between controversial and non-controversial issues and I will not be able to discuss the different positions extensively here. For the purposes of the following argument, it will suffice to introduce my own approach to the criteria debate and then to discuss the implications of this approach for an adequate educational response to extremism (see 3. and 4.). The approach

is pluralistic in the sense that it amounts to a coupling of a political and a "science-oriented" criterion, which can be outlined as follows:

1. A politically relevant question should be discussed controversially if no clear answer can be derived with respect to it on the basis of central political values and principles (i.e. central fundamental and human rights; personal and political autonomy, value pluralism; as well as separation of powers, protection of minorities, rule of law, etc.), which can be considered constitutive for enabling a good personal and political life in liberal-democratic states.
2. A politically relevant issue should be discussed controversially if there are different reasonable, i.e. well-founded and (best possible) empirically substantiated views on this issue and if the relevant issue is considered genuinely controversial in the relevant scientific or research disciplines – according to their own standards of rationality, methods and argumentation and bodies of knowledge. The teaching of controversial topics should therefore be oriented towards the intellectual and discursive standards – 'the intellectual life' (Yacek, 2020) and the associated expertise (Tillson, 2017; Zimmermann & Robertson, 2017) – of scientific disciplines.

When teachers discuss controversial issues they should orientate themselves at these two equally valid – criteria in order to draw the legitimate limits of discursive tolerance. This does not mean that views which are obviously false and politically illegitimate should not be discussed in the classroom at all. It only implies that they should not be discussed controversially as a legitimate view among others. In the case of climate change, for instance, the basic relevant scientific questions are largely uncontroversial (e.g., the fact that anthropogenic climate change exists). This does not hold, however, with respect to the political questions that are associated with how to respond to climate change, which should thus be discussed controversially. The positions of climate change deniers can still be discussed and criticized in the classroom, but they should not be legitimized by teachers by treating them as a scientifically sound perspective. The position of the Turkish government on the genocide of the Armenians, to use another example, should neither be counted as politically nor as scientifically legitimate, and this also holds for a variety of conspiracy theories defended by right wing movements and parties (such as the 'refugee replacement plan').

The adequate application of both criteria to concrete cases is no simple exercise in deduction, but dependent on the careful exercise of teachers' professional power of judgement. Moreover, also in relatively clear cases,

it does not automatically follow from both criteria how to practically deal with a specific issue in the classroom in a pedagogically prudent and effective way. If a student, for instance, makes antisemitic remarks in the classroom the teacher certainly has an obligation not to stay neutral but to intervene (e.g., by shutting the student up; political criterion) and also to use other educative means in order to change the student's mindset (e.g., by educating the student about the history of antisemitism; science-oriented criterion). There are, however, many sound practical ways and methods with which the teacher may foster the aims of democratic education in different contexts and both criteria leave her a lot of leeway in enforcing the limits of discursive toleration in classroom debates. Before I will discuss what this can and should mean in the case of educational responses to extremism, I will first deal with the question how we should define extremism and why extremism is problematic from an educational and political perspective in the first place.

3. Extremism and extremism research

Extremism as a concept is no less contested than a proper understanding of the different and highly complex processes of becoming an extremist (radicalization) (see Jesse, 2018).[3] In what follows I will first provide a definition of extremism as it is conceptualized in the context of extremism research and reconstruct some of the most important features of extremist ideologies. Second, drawing on the two criteria of controversiality I will show why extremist ideologies and their different variants are essentially intolerant. Third, I will discuss an important critique of the notion of extremism.

Extremism, according to Backes and Jesse (1996, p. 45), can be understood as a collective term for different political attitudes and aspirations that are united in their rejection of the democratic constitutional state and its fundamental values and rules. Starting with this general and normative characterization of extremism we can, following Cassam (2021a), distinguish extremist ideologies, an extremist mindset, and extremist methods as well as corresponding forms of cognitive, behavioral and psychological forms of radicalization. Adopting an extremist ideology (such as certain forms of right-wing extremism or radical Islamism) often goes along with the

3 The question of how common extremism is in liberal democracies, and how this should be measured, is a classical topic of extremism research, especially in the German debate. These and related methodological problems and empirical questions are beyond the scope of this paper.

development of an extremist mindset (constituted among others by extreme forms of moralism and the assumption that certain deeds are justified by a supposed moral necessity, the cultivation of ressentiment as well as, according to Miliopoulos (2018), fanatism, dogmatism, egocentrism, lack of empathy, and the incapacity to question one's own believes), but does not necessarily imply that the agent also is in favor of adopting extremist methods (such as terrorist attacks and other forms of politically motivated violence). Likewise, to radicalize cognitively (the process of adopting an extremist ideology) usually goes hand in hand with a process of psychological radicalization (the adoption of an extremist mindset) but does not necessarily yet nevertheless often (Miliopoulos, 2018) also result in a radicalization of behavior such as the use of extremist methods of action. As has been mentioned above: one can have intolerant attitudes and views without acting them out practically.

While I will say more about the manifold problems in identifying general patterns and relevant explanatory causal and enabling factors in processes of radicalization in the next two sections, I will now, drawing on the work of Backes (2018, 152-156), reconstruct general structural elements that all extremist ideologies – despite the immense variation of their contents and forms – share. I will focus on extremist ideologies, because "becoming an extremist *consists in* the adoption of an extremist ideology" (Cassam, 2021a, 204). Thus, the identification of shared features of such ideologies is of central importance for an educationally sound approach to extremism in the classroom.

Extremist ideologies, first, are all based on a strict dualism between friends and enemies, a positively evaluated ingroup and devalued outgroup. The adoption of corresponding – usually highly undifferentiated and distorted – views of the other has a central function for the formation of the identity of extremist individuals or groups, resulting in a dualist (i.e. right versus wrong) perspective on reality and tending to serve as a justification of intolerance (usually by questioning the universality of human rights or by justifying some form of inequality). Second, this perspective goes along with exclusive and absolute claims of validity concerning the interpretative and explanatory scope as well as the truth of the extremist ideology, that is assumed to be applicable to the whole of reality and human existence. According to an extremist ideology all other interpretations of reality are mistaken (e.g., because based on some form of false consciousness). This dogmatic view is often based on conspiracy theories, that paint a highly one-sided and pessimistic picture of social and political reality and provide their adherents with the (misguided) feeling of belonging to an epistemic avantgarde. Extremist ideologies thus have a strong anti-pluralistic tendency

(both with respect to political, ethical and religious views and with respect to corresponding identities) as well as a tendency to immunize themselves against critique and counterarguments and thereby undermine one of the preconditions of rational discussions. Disagreement and dissent according to extremist ideologies are not a fact of life that has in principle to be accepted or at least tolerated, but something that needs to be overcome.

Given this characterization of extremist ideologies it should be clear that they should not be treated as legitimate views in a controversy in the classroom and that they thus should be taught and criticized in a directive manner. They are incompatible with the political criterion because they question the validity of basic values of liberal democracies such as the acceptance of equal human rights as well as pluralism. The systematic devaluation of certain groups based on simplistic constructions and black-and-white thinking is obviously not in line with the aims of democratic education (such as political autonomy). Moreover, extremist ideologies are incompatible with the science-oriented criterion because they are based on absolutist and exclusivist validity claims: they immunize themselves against critique and they propagate an undifferentiated view on the social and political world. They should be an object of critique in the classroom and should not be treated as one legitimate and adequate perspective among others.

To state on a general level that extremist ideologies are not compatible with the political and the science-oriented criterion does not imply that there may not be boundary cases, where it may not be entirely clear whether we are dealing with such an ideology and how exactly we should apply both criteria to them. These problems are also emphasized by critics of the concept of extremism, such as Wiegel (2011). An important line of critique argues that the reference to basic values of liberal democracies via the notion of extremism results in a self-immunization of the liberal state against critique, for instance, when capitalism is interpreted as an essential component of liberal democracy and every criticism of this economic order is labeled as extremist. This critique is certainly correct in arguing that such an application of the notion of extremism would result indeed in a too narrow conception of legitimate controversiality and the limits of tolerance. The link between liberal democracy and capitalism (or different varieties of capitalism) is itself contested and therefore should not be taken for granted, neither in public debates nor in classroom discussions. This, however, neither implies that we could do without references to basic values of liberal democracies in identifying extremism and the limits of toleration, nor that such references necessarily suppress dissent in a problematic way. A central difference between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes

in the end is that dissent and critique are both in principle possible and legitimate, at least as long as they are not radically at odds with liberal democratic values, which tends to be the case when it comes to extremist ideologies.

These problems, which mostly refer to problems of the application of the notion of extremism, can in principle be resolved. In the next section I will discuss the practical normative question of how teachers should respond to extremism in the classroom.

4. How to respond to extremism in the classroom

Extremism research shows that there are many different pathways to radicalization and that it is extremely difficult to generalize the different reasons, explanatory and facilitating factors and their complex interplay involved in individual biographies. Potential candidates are experiences of discrimination and lack of recognition, the search for authority figures, identity crises, problematic forms of socialization and early childhood experiences, experiences of deprivation and insecurity, perceived injustices and grievance, feelings of marginalization and victimhood, the adoption of ideological frames, group dynamics and political transformations (see the overviews in Cassam, 2021a, and Miliopoulus, 2018). This multiplicity of different factors indicates that there are many different ways for schools and teachers to respond to extremism and illustrates the immense hermeneutical challenges involved in interpreting individual statements of students as indicative of an extremist mindset and ideology or even of processes of radicalization. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the task of identifying and preventing processes of radicalization (and thus to anticipate something that has not yet happened!) is overburdening teachers (see Section 5). Moreover, one also has to acknowledge the highly problematic potential consequences of interpreting and addressing students as potential extremists in the making (see Section 5). Nevertheless, it also needs to be acknowledged that extremist statements or statements that are indicative of an extremist ideology or – most likely – fragments of such an ideology (e.g., Covid-19 as the latest version of a Jewish world conspiracy, the statement that Muslims are trying to invade the Netherlands and therefore need to be deported, that the teacher Samuel Paty deserved to be killed because he insulted the prophet) are political realities that do occur in classrooms and that teachers as a consequence have to find ways to respond to them in an educationally and politically sound way.

To begin with[4], a distinction can be made between extremist statements that are obviously no longer compatible with the basic values of liberal democracies and are no longer protected by freedom of opinion, and those that are more likely to be located in a grey area, which leaves some leeway with how one may interpret them. For example, if a student questions the human rights of certain groups in the classroom or makes explicitly racist remarks, teachers are politically (i.e. for the sake of the values of liberal democracy as identified in the extremism definition) and often – depending on the context – also legally obliged to intervene and take a clear stand. The fact that teachers often tolerate and do not position themselves with respect to such remarks (see for empirical studies on this problem in Germany Besand, 2020; Winckler, 2019; Georg , 2021) and also do not discuss extremist views in cases in which they know that students hold them, may have different and certainly understandable reasons. For instance, mistaken views about the need to remain politically neutral and the limits of legitimate controversiality and tolerance, fear of conflicts and heated discussions as well as of repercussions due to pressure from parents or political parties, lack of time for reasonable discussions. One also has to acknowledge that teaching controversial issues is never without risks (Pace, 2021), that the social dynamics in heated classroom discussions can never entirely be controlled by the teacher, and that there are also no guarantees that they have the intended effects. Teachers have to find ways to navigate the need to contain these risks in an educationally reasonable way without foreclosing the many opportunities for learning and self-transformation that embracing these risks in discussions can entail (Rosén & Arneback, 2021; Yacek, 2021). Nevertheless, the tendency not to position themselves is arguably the most important educational mistake teachers can make when dealing with extremist statements. This is not only because the students in question often have either no role models at all or bad ones, but also because in this way they learn that such views can or perhaps even should be tolerated in and outside of classroom discussions. In line with the political criterion, it is up to the teacher as an educational professional and authority to take political responsibility in such cases in order to not leave the 'stage' to those who hold extremist views and to create a sufficiently safe and tolerant classroom climate.

It is certainly debatable and depends on the specific case whether, how and to what extent such statements can and should still be dealt with pedagogically and when legal sanctions are appropriate. It is of pivotal

4 The next paragraphs are partly based the arguments in Drerup (2021b).

importance to take into account that students are usually not yet fully autonomous and epistemically vulnerable agents that can more easily be manipulated or indoctrinated than most grown-ups. They are still in the process of developing their political views, can have very different reasons and motives for such statements (e.g. provocation of the teacher, personal problems, mindless reproduction of contents circulated via social media, or influences of peers or parents) and may also be open to counter-arguments in different ways. Strict pedagogical interventions that forbid pupils to speak up, or (legal) sanctions are sometimes necessary (most importantly, to protect third parties that may be directly affected by such statements, Callan, 2011). However, in many, if not most cases, such sanctions are unlikely to be educationally effective in the long run if they do not address the underlying assumptions and reasons for the views. Such interventions can also have non-intended side-effects, precisely because the issues are no longer discussed and clarified in the classroom (e.g., withdrawal into epistemic echo-chambers outside the classroom, where agents mutually reinforce each other's prejudices). Completely closing down the controversy also "means less room in which these crucial matters can be discussed in an educational way" (Rosén & Arnebeck, 2021, p. 7) and can lead to a hardening of ideological perspectives. As a general rule, extremist positions and the intolerant attitudes that go along with them should not be left uncommented in the debate. While it may often be a difficult task in the context of the discussion to make clear to students that they deserve respect as persons but that respect is not owed to statements that do not respect the rights of others, teachers should nevertheless always try to address all students as agents capable of critically reflecting on their believes and objections.

There are certainly extreme cases where it seems almost impossible to cognitively reach students and engage them in a reasonable discussion (e.g., in cases of firm believers in conspiracy theories). But also these students should ideally be involved in the discussion and confronted with the often inhumane consequences of their views (even if it is only for the sake of the learning effects this may have on third parties). In any case the result of this discussion should not be 'open' and it must be clear from the outset that basic fundamental and human rights provide the framework that makes a democratic controversy possible in the first place. Ideally the initiation into the practice of discussion will then have the effect, especially in the longer run, that those who express extremist statements change their views when they have to reflect on and deal with critical objections and alternative perspectives.

Thus, while it remains true that in the end teachers will have to rely on their practical power of judgement in deciding what is the most prudent

practical way of dealing with extremist statements, two general educational strategies can be formulated in line with the political and the science-oriented criterion. First, teachers need to position themselves clearly as political authorities and make clear that such statements are not tolerated and also why they are not tolerated in the classroom. As political authorities they should not remain neutral with respect to such positions, they have to clarify what is and what is not to be tolerated in the context of a liberal democracy. Second, as epistemic authorities they should confront extremist ideologies based on reasons that challenge and deconstruct the simplistic binary constructions and epistemically flawed worldviews they tend to rely on (Cassam, 2021b). They should provide students with a basic understanding of extremist ideologies, their function and structure and also focus the classroom discussion not so much on the individual extremist statement but on the more general societal developments and problems that provide the sociopolitical context in which extremism flourishes (Thein, 2021). Thus, an education *for* tolerance should be complemented by teaching about the reasons and explanations for tolerance and intolerance (Avery, Sullivan, & Wood, 1997).

Many of the statements made in class that can be considered as indicative of an extremist ideology are located in an ethical and political grey area, as they tend to point in a particular – extremist – political direction in terms of their rhetoric and style, but are not always *clearly* incompatible with basic liberal and democratic values. This problem intensifies when (extreme) right-wing or left-wing parties sit in parliaments and the spectrum of democratically approved positions shifts in public debates. This raises the question of how teachers should deal with positions that have an 'extremist ring' to them, but – *at least prima facie* – cannot straightforward be identified as extremist. What is to be done, for example, when students make assertions that the 'boat is full in Germany', that – to use the words of German right wing politicians – one should be proud again of the 'achievements of the Wehrmacht'. Again, there can be no simple formula or template for dealing with such statements. With respect to the 'achievements of the Wehrmacht', there is a need for political-historical education, both about the historical contexts and about the political function of such statements, for whose adequate interpretation in the context of the political culture of Germany one arguably does not need elaborate hermeneutical skills. Here too – and not only with reference to openly extremist statements – teachers will often need to take a clear and unambiguous political stand and at the same time to criticize the propagated historical revisionism.

Nevertheless, it is also true here that learning and educational processes can often only be triggered if students are given the opportunity to discuss their views and the concerns associated with them, also to make sure that they can have the experience of being held accountable for them based on rational criticism. If a student states that the 'boat is full', then it must be clarified what exactly is meant by this and how this can be justified. This, in turn, can be used as an opportunity for a debate on migration policy in the past and present, in which there are different – in principle debatable and legitimate – views that can be discussed. It should at least be made clear how complex the relevant legal, ethical and political issues are, that all-too simple answers will contribute little or nothing to adequately understand them and that it is also possible to argue constructively about issues on which it will hardly be possible to agree. In order to ensure this, however, often also positions that seem politically incorrect or even 'inhumane' or 'extremist' (at least from the point of view of some students and teachers, and sometimes only because they are not in line with their personal views) should be allowed to be voiced in the classroom. It would, for instance, at least in most cases, be descriptively wrong to describe either defenders of open borders or of the regulation of migration as 'extremists'. Finally, it is also worth remembering that in some cases it is not students who do not tolerate the ambivalences and ambiguities of a democratic culture of debate, but rather teachers who have extremist leanings and instrumentalize the classroom to impose their political views on their students.

5. The discourse on extremism in the classroom: A form of second-order intolerance?

According to a variety of political and educational programs against extremism (e.g., in Germany and the UK), teachers and social workers should prevent extremism and identify and report tendencies of radicalization in their students. Thus, they are expected to take pedagogical action *before* the actual development of corresponding views and *before* the commission of potential crimes. A central problem for the conception and practical implementation of these programs is therefore the difficult task of *anticipating* the development of dangerous ways of thinking and behavior among adolescents. This task is fraught with political, ethical as well as educational and epistemological difficulties and there are indeed many reasons to be skeptical and critical concerning prevention programs against extremism in and outside of schools (e.g., due to flawed theoretical assumptions concerning processes

of radicalization; Cassam, 2021b). This expectation "positions teachers in a potentially difficult situation. On the one hand, they are encouraged to engage young people in debates about controversial issues, but on the other hand they are required to monitor the young people's opinions for signs that they may dissent from the FBVs (Fundamental British Values: J.D.), which is seen as a risk factor for developing extremist ideas" (Jerome & Elwick, 2020, p. 223). This tension points to arguably the most important critique of programs such as *Prevent*, namely, that they reproduce highly selective societal discourses that usually tend to focus on a specific type of extremism (radical political Islamism) and stigmatize an already marginalized community (Muslims), deepen problematic community divides and feed into militant Islamists narratives (Iner, 2019). According to this critique, teachers, by interpreting and perhaps even addressing particular students as potential security threats, reify existing stereotypes and racialized hierarchies in the classroom and undermine the very educational processes and aims prevention programs are meant to foster (such as tolerance). Such a form of 'education for tolerance', is not only counterproductive for establishing genuine educational relationships and dialogues (O'Donnell, 2017), but also amounts to a form of second-order intolerance in searching for intolerance *always in the same* groups and doctrines that are interpreted as paradigmatic protagonists and examples of extremism (see for empirical research on stereotypes in curricula and textbooks that are meant to serve the purposes of prevention programs Christodoulou & Szakác, 2018; see also the general overview in Hößl et al., 2020).

I think that these critiques are highly important and to a certain extent plausible. First of all, stereotypes or discourses that marginalize certain groups and construct cultural conflicts should be the object of critique in classroom discussions and not be blindly reproduced (Merry, 2020). This presupposes that teachers are to a certain extent aware of their own biases – also in responding to extremism. Moreover, it is indeed in many cases epistemically highly unclear when and based on which criteria we should interpret certain statements as indicators of a possible risk of radicalization. Teachers are not and also cannot reasonably be expected to have the skills of counter-terrorism and deradicalization experts, and as a consequence the likelihood of misunderstandings and misinterpretations is rather big (which arguably also holds for many of the experts themselves). Also given the manifold reasons, causes and explanations of extremism, teachers need to be very careful in ascribing firmly held extremist views to students. They should not simply extrapolate from expressions of fragments of extremist ideologies the assumption that students are totally immersed in an

extremist ideology. In the context of classroom discussions of controversial issues students need to learn and teachers have to make clear, that there is a crucial difference between behavior or fragments of ideological views that count as extremist (and should not be tolerated) and the individual, developing persons that bring them forward (and should be respected as persons). Instead of labelling children as 'extremists in the making', teachers should take them seriously as agents that are still learning and can provide reasons for their positions, which can and should be criticized in the discussion. Moreover, when confronting extremist statements (of whatever type) they can also try to focus on more general problems related to different forms of extremism and their commonalities, instead of singling out a specific variant. Thus, instead of reproducing always the same more or less constructed cultural and religious conflicts in schools and instead of focusing on always the same groups that are assumed to be disposed to extremism, they should focus on different variants of extremism and the contextual factors that are relevant for understanding them.

Thus, the many problems involved in existing prevention programs should indeed be criticized and some of these programs certainly either deserve to be abolished or radically reformed, because they do not provide a reasonable basis for an educationally sound response to extremism. While this can be granted, we should nevertheless be careful not to 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. One can acknowledge that there indeed are problematic aspects of prevention programs and highly selective discourses on extremism and radicalization. This, however, does not mean that we are not *also* dealing with a real – and not just constructed – problem here. To assume that extremism in and outside the classroom is more or less only a discursive phenomenon is just not in line with the facts on the ground, as many teachers will certainly attest, who have to find reasonable ways to respond to extremist statements in their everyday educational practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to mention a couple of desiderata for research and practice that are indicated by my discussion of adequate and problematic ways to respond to extremism in the classroom. First, teacher education programs often do not adequately prepare teachers for the different practical tasks of democratic education more generally and for dealing with controversial issues in the classroom in particular. One way to improve this situation is the use of normative case studies (Levinson & Fay, 2019), that, for

instance, depict paradigmatic situations, in which teachers have to respond to extremist statements (Georg, 2021) and which provide a basic orientation of the normatively relevant aspects of how an adequate response can look like (Drerup, 2021b). Second, given the critiques of prevention programs discussed above, we need more empirical research on non-intended side effects of prevention programs, which could provide the basis for thinking about practical ways for teachers to professionally engage with these problems or avoid them in the first place. Third, we need more theoretically guided empirical educational research on potential general patterns in biographies of extremists (Cassam, 2021a; Aßmann, 2020), which may help us to improve existing prevention programs or at least may help us to understand why they do not work as they are meant to (Cassam, 2021b).

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