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## Preventing violent extremism in Kenyan schools: Talking about terrorism

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### *Abstract*

This article focuses on what teachers and students in Kenya consider the best ways to prevent violent extremism. Two common approaches to preventing violent extremism through education are discussed. The first approach is resilience to violent extremism through critical thinking and counter-narratives. The second approach is inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion. Key findings from my research on secondary schools in Kenya reveal that teachers are very conscious of not taking a confrontational approach to controversial issues like violent extremism, as doing so might provoke certain student groups in class. Thus, an avoidance strategy is employed to create harmony and social cohesion. This article is based on fieldwork in three Kenyan secondary schools from 2019 that involved 50 classroom observations, 30 semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and documentary analysis of the Kenyan secondary school syllabus and textbooks.

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### Introduction

On the afternoon of January 15, 2019, I was taking an Uber home after conducting fieldwork in a school in Nairobi, Kenya. I was investigating the role of schools in preventing violent extremism. My Uber driver and I were stuck in traffic right outside of a hotel complex when I discovered that smoke was billowing out of the building. We quickly realised that the hotel was under attack, and we later learnt that Al-Shabaab combatants were the main perpetrators.

Twenty people were killed that day at the Dusit Hotel complex. In the following days I visited schools in order to grasp how teachers were approaching this terrorist attack in class. This article will use the Dusit Hotel terrorist attack as a backdrop to discuss how teachers

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approach the topic of violent extremism in class and what impact this may have on its prevention.

There is a growing corpus of international literature on education in societies divided by ethnicity, language and culture (Baranovic et al., 2007; Cole, 2007; Davies, 2003; Freedman et al., 2008; Weldon, 2010). In terms of extremism and education, the literature focuses to a large extent on theoretical or macro approaches to these topics, whereas empirical studies from schools are hard to find (Sjøen & Jore, 2019). Moreover, few studies have been conducted on the impact of education in preventing extremism (Aly et al., 2014; Gielen, 2017).

It is difficult to prove whether teachers or schools can actually prevent the cultivation of violent extremism among students. As Lindekilde (2012) claims, there are inherent methodological problems in attempting to prove ‘the negative’, i.e. that a lack of extremism would *actually* constitute conclusive evidence that preventive methods in schools are effective. This article does not, therefore, aim to ‘prove’ the existence of a causal link between teaching methods and the prevention of violent extremism. Instead of investigating what works in education (Biesta, 2015), I followed the approach taken by Gielen (2017), whose focus is on ‘what may work (or not), for whom, in which contexts, and how?’ Thus, in this article, I ask ‘How do educators focus on preventing violent extremism in school and what are the implications?’ My main findings revealed that critical thinking, open discussion and counter-narratives were for the most part avoided by the teachers. This is because the teachers were concerned that such topics would potentially stigmatise certain student groups, such as Muslims and Somalis. Consequently, the teachers’ approach was mainly one of integration and social cohesion.

This article is based on documentary analysis of the Kenyan secondary school syllabus and textbooks, in addition to fieldwork conducted in three Kenyan secondary schools in 2019 that consisted of classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers. The findings from this fieldwork provided insights into how teachers approach the topic of violent extremism in class.

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## Education and violent extremism in Kenya

Violent extremism and terrorism are a growing security concern in Kenya. In 1998, Al-Qaeda was responsible for the simultaneous bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, killing over 200 people. In 2013, the Somali-based terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab orchestrated a brutal attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi. This was followed by additional attacks on Garissa University in 2015 and as mentioned the Dusit Hotel in January 2019.

Kenya's intervention in Somalia through Operation Linda Nchi (Protect the Country), which was accompanied by an offensive by a 22,000-strong African Union (AU) force, was directed at combating Al-Shabaab, especially in response to kidnappings of tourists on Kenya's border with Somalia and in Lamu in 2011. Since this intervention, Al-Shabaab has taken advantage of Kenya's domestic vulnerabilities, such as corruption, a porous border and infiltration by terrorist cells, to launch additional terrorist attacks (Goldsmith, 2018).

Al-Shabaab attracts many recruits in Kenya who go on to receive training in Somalia and then return to Kenya to carry out attacks (Breidlid, 2019). According to Speckhard and Shajkovci (2019) many members of Al-Shabaab are recruited based on promises of scholarships, jobs and adventure, but others are motivated to join the terrorist group due to harassment and discrimination by the Kenyan state.

To counter terrorism, the Kenyan government has enacted anti-terrorism legislation. This legislation, however, has triggered extrajudicial killings of radical Muslims and suspected terrorists by the Kenyan police. In 2014, 'Operation Usalma Watch', also referred to as 'Operation Sanitize Eastleigh', was launched by the Kenyan government in the predominantly Somali neighbourhood of Eastleigh, Nairobi. The purpose of the operation was to deter terrorism by apprehending Al-Shabaab members, and by confiscating any weapons and explosives that were found (Wairuri, 2018). This operation has since been severely criticised by national and international observers, as many Somali residents in Eastleigh were subject to human rights abuses, such as deportation, arbitrary arrests, assaults and extrajudicial killings,

during the duration of the crackdown. The outrage this caused, especially among Muslim and Somali communities in Kenya, may have paradoxically strengthened and accelerated the growth of Al-Shabaab (Hansen et al., 2019).

Clearly, Kenyan society is racked by extreme inequality, which is especially evident in the marginalisation of Muslims, and as such there is an urgent need to steer development efforts towards mitigating rampant Muslim poverty and a host of other social problems, all of which contribute in their own way to radicalization and violent extremism (Mohammed 2015). Even more troubling are recent initiatives by several violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to extend their influence to schools and colleges with the express purpose of targeting students who are particularly vulnerable to recruitment (Ali, 2018). Although the Kenyan government and NGOs appear to be gradually acknowledging the urgent task of using education to address and prevent violent extremism, it is unclear what measures – if any – are actually being implemented towards this end in various education institutions.

Since schools are venues for frequent interactions between students and teachers as well as for the dissemination of vast amounts of information, they can also serve as vital arenas in which to challenge extremist narratives. According to the Kenyan national syllabus, teachers are expected to equip students with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution (Secondary syllabus, volume 3, 2002, vi).

### **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

In this section, I will discuss two key mechanisms (or approaches) aimed at preventing violent extremism in schools: ‘resilience to violent extremism’ and ‘inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion’. Although these two mechanisms are globally renowned for their preventative effects with regard to extremism and terrorism, the main challenge in the Kenyan context is the extent to which they can be practically implemented in schools.

*Resilience to violent extremism through critical thinking and counter-narratives*

Resilience to violent extremism occurs when an individual is exposed to one or more conditions of radicalization and yet does not transition to membership in violent extremist groups. As will be discussed, critical thinking and counter-narratives can greatly enhance one's resilience to violent extremism.

*Critical thinking and student-centred pedagogies*

Resilience to violent extremism is perceived to be of vital importance in 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) in schools. In contrast to 'countering violent extremism' (CVE), which focuses more on risk groups or already radicalized individuals, PVE is a less-targeted intervention insofar as it focuses on the prevention of violent extremism among a larger audience (Sjøen and Jore, 2019). Doing so entails capacity building and teacher training so that resilience can be cultivated among students. Resilience to violent extremism involves the capacity to question assumptions and simplistic explanations of the truth. It also involves the strength to resist using violent means to resolve problems. According to Sjøen and Jore (2019), resilience should be developed through student-centred pedagogies, the socialisation of democratic values and an inclusive school environment. Moreover, thinking critically by exploring different types of knowledge and values is also emphasised. Sjøen and Jore assert that the 'right' kind of knowledge cannot be installed from above. Davies (2018), Aly et al. (2014) and Goldberg (2014) emphasise that student-centred pedagogies are pivotal to increasing critical awareness through the exploration of different ideas and values, as well as diverse forms of knowledge. Through the active engagement of students in such explorations, critical thinking skills are strengthened. A common, core characteristic of those who embrace violent extremism is the acceptance of simple answers to complex questions (Council of Europe). Critical thinking is thus of utmost importance to the effective understanding of different perspectives, to the earnest search for evidence of simplistic claims, and to the robust denial of conspiracy theories. Since students have access to a wide variety of online sources,

the cultivation of resilience among them will culminate in their mastery of the skills needed to critically evaluate the information they receive (UNESCO, 2017).

Open discussions about controversial topics are indispensable to helping students learn to develop critical thinking skills. Creating *safe spaces* can make students feel more comfortable and thereby encourage them to engage in more open discussions and to question their own assumptions as well as those of others. This can in turn help the students to more fully develop critical evaluation skills and the discernment needed to detect flaws and manipulations of questionable sources (UNESCO, 2017). Ultimately, such achievements on the part of students will help them better counter extremist narratives. Research by Aly et al. (2013) illustrates how building resilience through the open discussion of terrorism can contribute to cultivating the perception among students that violent extremism is unjust and inhumane, and can foster within them a greater sense of empathy for terror victims.

Notwithstanding, the extant research has noted that in many national contexts worldwide, restrictions are imposed on the freedom of speech, which can contravene efforts to prevent violent extremism in some countries. Likewise, the absence of safe spaces in classes can be problematic, as it could severely inhibit critical thinking skills (McGlynn & McDaid, 2016; O'Donnell, 2016). Moreover, research has indicated that building resilience to violent extremism through critical thinking often occurs in instructivist educational cultures, which involve a *transfer* of 'so-called correct forms of knowledge' (Davies, 2018; Mattsson et al., 2016; Mattsson & Säljö, 2018; Taylor & Soni, 2017). This teaching style is analogous to banking education (Freire, 1970), in which teachers to a large extent deposit knowledge into passive recipients, i.e. the pupils. According to O'Donnell (2015), a top-down teaching style that seeks to change behaviours or beliefs is problematic. By viewing students as 'objects' that can be changed, engagement by the students will suffer, leading them to resent and potentially even resist such efforts. As O'Donnell claims:

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If education is not seen as a space that invites open dialogue and free speech, students will not engage and they will not open up to the kinds of transformation and questioning that the pedagogical encounter can bring in its wake (O'Donnell, 2015, p. 71).

*State of the art in counter-narratives*

Resilience can also be built by providing counter-narratives. Many scholars have highlighted the significance of counter-narratives for preventing violent extremism in schools (Ghosh, 2017; Rached, 2020; Sieckelinck et al., 2015). In the Kenyan context, this means that counter-narratives could potentially represent a strategy teachers can employ to challenge extremist attitudes among students.

Theories on counter-narratives posit their capacity to combat or mitigate the narratives promoted by extremists or extremist rhetoric. *Narratives* can be defined as the use of written or oral stories to explain or clarify events, which could be especially productive in preventing violent extremism in schools (Briggs & Feve, 2013). Moreover, counter-narratives not only challenge extremist ideologies but also illustrate the negative implications and consequences of joining extremist groups (Braddock & Horgan, 2016).

According to Sieckelinck et al. 2015, a curriculum should be developed that specifically focuses on countering the narratives of violent extremists. This curriculum should explicitly discuss the dangers that accompany extremist propaganda and 'the seductive character of a Utopian worldview' (Sieckelinck et al. 2015, p. 339). Towards this end, exploring a variety of interpretations and letting the students critically engage in the extremist worldview are essential, as is a concerted focus on absolute claims to 'truth' and 'good'. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) state that radicalization is predominantly a *reactive* process, and that '[t]he same mechanisms moving people toward radicalization and terrorism will operate as well in those who react to radicals and terrorists' (p. 430). Such a dialectical model of an active–reactive process thus situates counter-narratives as an oppositional narrative to narratives of extremism. This reactive process is in line with Maan`s (2016) definition of counter-narratives, in which one plays by someone else's rules by reacting based on the premises of extremist narratives.

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Speckhard et al.'s (2019) research on a Somali community in San Diego revealed that in a focus group setting, counter-narratives can be extremely efficient. Discussions in the focus group led to the participants becoming more negative towards terrorist groups such as ISIS and other violent extremist groups. Hence, these tools, if used safely and carefully, constitute important means by which extremist attitudes can be effectively fought and countered.

That said, the research conducted by Speckhard et al. (2019) also showed that focusing only on cognitive arguments is often insufficient for countering extremist attitudes. Since groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda rely on emotionally evocative pictures and videos, emotional counter-stories centred on disillusioned former ISIS soldiers might be a more effective means of discrediting such extremist views. It was also discovered that the emotional and conversational nature of targeted preventions was best facilitated through face-to-face interactions and interpersonal activity.

Some authors, however, have questioned the utility of counter-narratives in preventing violent extremism (Ferguson, 2016; Hemmingsen & Castro, 2020; Kundnani, 2012; Rosand & Winterbotham, 2019). A meta study conducted by Carthy et al. (2020) concluded that the effectiveness of counter-narratives is ultimately limited. Carthy and colleagues found that counter-narratives had no effect on decreasing the intention to engage in violent extremism. Moreover, in their review, they found no evidence that counter-narratives that challenged the theological underpinnings of extremist narratives were efficient. They did, however, reveal that counter-narratives *could* have an effect on some risk factors for violent extremism. For example, a small effect on decreasing in-group favouritism/outgroup hostility, which is arguably crucial in radical belief systems, was observed. This effect was particularly efficient if it was derived from an alternative account, i.e. a counter-narrative that deliberately opposed an extremist discourse (Carthy et al., 2020).

Another counter-radicalization effort employs a theory originally established by William McGuire (1961) called inoculation theory which proposes that people who hold healthy opinions are introduced (inoculated) to mechanisms that help them not to be persuaded by arguments against their beliefs, and give them arguments to defend their beliefs. Such an



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approach is claimed by some researchers (e.g. Braddock, 2019; Saleh et al., 2021) to make those in question more resilient to extremist propaganda.

*Counter-narratives as thought policing?*

Ferguson questions the utility of counter-narratives by pointing out that a clear link between extremist views and extremist actions is not always evident. Individuals may hold and express extremist viewpoints without resorting to violence (Ferguson, 2016). According to Edwards (2016), a focus on changing worldviews could develop into ‘thought policing’ and alienate individuals by policing their opinions rather than their actions. As stated by Hansen and Lid (2020) in another context, deradicalization that is focused on changing mindsets and worldviews is common in totalitarian regimes and can be easily misused. These types of deradicalization programmes may be primarily operationalised to circumvent democratic rights, minority rights, or social and political change. Changing a person’s religious or political opinion is, moreover, questionable, as such opinions and beliefs are protected by human rights and should not be criminalised (Hansen & Lid, 2020).

The problem with counter-narratives is that they risk having an exclusionary effect. Certain beliefs, attitudes and religious practices are emphasised as ‘normal’. However, individuals who do not fit into this ‘normality’ may feel even more marginalised and alienated through these counter-narratives (Gemmerli, 2016a, 2016b). According to Kundnani & Hayes (2018), the fact that several governments support and promote a form ‘of moderate Islam’ runs counter to secular principles of neutrality and non-intervention in religion, thereby becoming a symptom of double standards, which can in turn risk further marginalisation and polarisation. As Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, pointed out in her 2008 report on the UK:

[I]t is not the Government’s role to look for the ‘true voices of Islam’ or of any other religion or belief. Since religions or communities of belief are not homogenous entities it seems advisable to acknowledge and take into account the diversity of voices. ... The

contents of a religion or belief should be defined by the worshippers themselves. (Jahangir, 2008, p. 21)

Rosand and Winterbotham (2019) argue that focusing on counter-narratives fails to address what makes extremist discourses attractive in the first place. An emphasis on counter-narratives might underplay the significance of grievances, identity issues and marginalisation in radicalization processes. Doing so could risk addressing the symptoms rather than the real causes of violent extremism. According to Roy (2008), there are examples of youths who have switched between different extremist ideologies. Discrediting either extremist ideology – or both – may not serve any purpose for these specific youths. The task here would be to identify the underlying cause of their grievances and offer solutions based on their individual problems.

### ***Role of inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion***

Another approach to preventing violent extremism is to encourage inclusion and tolerance, which entails working to ameliorate feelings of stigmatisation and marginalisation by different ethnic/religious groups. Stereotypes and misrepresentations of ethnic/religious groups in the school curriculum and in classes should thus be challenged (UNESCO, 2017).

Social cohesion can be defined as ‘the quality of coexistence between the multiple groups that operate within a society [...] along the dimensions of mutual respect and trust, shared values and social participation, life satisfaction and happiness as well as structural equity and social justice. (UNICEF, 2014)

*Social cohesion* in a society often implies that social relations are strong and that its members share a common identity. Values are shared, and there is an emphasis on social inclusion among the different ethnic and religious groups in the society. Social cohesion in this respect involves the sense of ‘belonging’. Conversely, a lack of social cohesion would convey the attitude that minority groups are not fully accepted by the majority population and that, to

be fully accepted, they must adhere to certain values. A lack of social cohesion thus also often means a failure of cultural diversity and thus an unwillingness to accommodate difference or ‘the Other’, i.e. accepting groups of people with sets of cultural and religious values different from those of the majority (Tawil & Harley, 2004). In many educational settings, such as in Kenya, it is often the knowledge and opinions of the majority communities that are emphasised, thereby leaving little room for minority opinions. Nevertheless, social cohesion may imply an attempt to communicate between different ethnic and religious groups to achieve a common platform of respect and trust. The promotion of social cohesion in the classroom is therefore a significant endeavour, particularly in terms of preventing extremism.

This approach is also in line with Halafoff and Wright-Neville’s (2009) social exclusion model, which states that students who become radicalized are often alienated from their communities and from the school environment.

The integration of different ethnic/religious groups has also been seen as important for preventing violent extremism. Intergroup contact theory suggests that contact between different social groups decreases prejudices and improves empathy between them. However, the long-term effects of intergroup contact in practice remain unclear (Gielen, 2017).

#### *Are inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion sufficient?*

However, according to Speckhard and Shaykovci (2018), messages of inclusion and tolerance are likely to fall on deaf ears for those who do not feel included, such as youths. What these youths need are messages that address their grievances, such as Islamophobia, marginalisation and discrimination. Counter-narratives are therefore crucial to the delegitimization of the narratives of the extremists who cater to and exploit these negative experiences. Extremists often claim that by joining their group, new members will enjoy an inclusive atmosphere (for Muslims) and will be granted new opportunities, especially to vent their anger against the rest of society.

Notwithstanding, it is important to underline that radicalization to violence is a complex process, and that different narratives will be interpreted and received differently from one person to the other. There is thus no universal answer concerning what narrative or other

approach will ultimately be effective, nor are teachers who are not professionally trained in this field given assurance that addressing these issues in a constructive way in class will be easy.

### Methodology

My data were collected during fieldwork in Nairobi in 2019. The geographical locations selected for my research were chosen due to their ethnic and religious composition. Given the sensitive and controversial nature of my research, the names of the districts, schools and of the participants as well as distinctive personal details were changed in order to preserve their anonymity

Suffice to say that what distinguishes the locations are their large Somali and Muslim populations. Most of the students in the schools in these locations are from an area in which Al-Shabaab has recruited many youths. I conducted interviews in one secular school and two Islamic integrated schools.

*Bera High* is a secular school whose student composition is mainly Muslim, Christian, Kenyan and Somali. *The Islamic Integrated High School* is an Islamic integrated boys' school. *Gora High School* is an Islamic integrated school enrolling only Muslim girls. As an alternative to the madrassas and the classical Qur'anic schools, the Islamic integrated schools are becoming increasingly popular in Kenya, where the national secular public high school curriculum and the Islamic education curriculum are combined (Sheik, 2013). Many Muslims see the Islamic integrated schools as a good alternative to the public schools, which may not accommodate Islamic religious education. All their pupils are Muslims, but they come from different ethnic groups, such as Arabs, Somalis and Kikuyus.

I conducted 50 classroom observations, focusing on the subjects of History and Government, Islamic Religious Education and Christian Religious Education. I conducted 20 observations at Bera High School, 15 at the Islamic Integrated High School, and 15 at Gora High School. The classroom observations were important for generating insights into how the

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teachers addressed the topic of violent extremism, and how this topic was received and treated in interactions with the students.

I conducted a total of 30 semi-structured interviews. At Bera High School, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three teachers, one principal and six students. At Gora High School, I conducted a total of 10 semi-structured interviews with two teachers, one principal and seven students. At the Islamic Integrated High School, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with two teachers, one principal and six students. The semi-structured interviews were based on data generated by classroom observations, thereby ensuring the relevance of the questions in the semi-structured interviews.

I also organised one focus group discussion at each of the three schools, ensuring that the students came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The focus group discussions complemented my data and generated information about the reasons underlying students' attitudes and opinions. One objective of the interviews and observations was to gain insights into what the teachers thought was the best way to prevent violent extremism in their school. Another objective was to obtain information about how the students perceived their teachers' openness about the topic of violent extremism. I had prepared questions, but I also allowed the participants to talk freely about the topic at hand. The following primary questions were asked: **To the teachers:** What do you think is the best way to prevent violent extremism in school? To what extent are you open about violent extremism with the students? **To the students:** To what extent do the teachers talk openly about violent extremism in the classroom? How inclusive is the school environment?

I also conducted interviews with experts in the field with regard to topics such as education, curriculum and violent extremism. In addition, I performed a document analysis of school textbooks in the subjects under investigation as well as of the high school syllabus.

Prior to collecting the data, I gained approval to undertake my project from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). I also obtained ethical approval from a Kenyan university and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya. All students who participated in the study received and

signed an informed consent form and were told that their participation in the study was completely voluntary. This information was especially important to disclose to the participants so that they would be assured that my research would not cause any harm to their safety and reputation.

The interviews were audio-recorded using a secure dictaphone. The transcription was organised and analysed thematically on the basis on the research objectives and questions. My analysis followed the structure of the interview guide. I probed the participants' reflections on how best to prevent violent extremism in the classroom. Thereafter, I focused on the teachers' openness surrounding violent extremism and whether the students were allowed to participate in related discussions. In the second stage, I analysed whether these responses were in line with the following two approaches: '*inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion*' and '*resilience to violent extremism*'. Finally, in the discussion of my findings, I paid particular attention to the implications these findings might have on preventing violent extremism in Kenyan schools.

## Findings and discussion

In this section, I present and discuss my findings related to the two approaches/responses to violent extremism and radicalization – '*inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion*' and '*resilience to violent extremism*' – under separate headlines. As mentioned, the terrorist attack at the Dusit Hotel in Nairobi took place during my fieldwork. I was therefore curious to determine to what extent the Dusit terrorist attack had affected teaching in the schools in the days following the attack and also the teachers' reflections on preventing violent extremism in general.

### *Inclusion, tolerance and social cohesion*

The Kenyan syllabus underlines the importance of 'removing conflicts and by promoting positive attitudes of mutual respect which enable them to live together in harmony, and foster patriotism in order to make a positive contribution to the life of the nation' (Kenya

Literature Bureau, 2002). The syllabus thus places emphasis on promoting tolerance and harmony in Kenya.

The teachers primarily focused on inclusion and tolerance in the schools. Philip, an Islamic religious teacher at Bera High School who is also the deputy principal for academic activities, stressed the importance of creating harmony and bolstering cohesion in class as well as avoiding divisions. He also explained that religious leaders from different faiths visited the school each week, a routine which is likely to increase interreligious tolerance:

*We also do many things to try to create cohesion between the different ethnic and religious groups at this school. We have morning assemblies on Monday and on Friday. On Monday, we have Christian assemblies where a priest comes and talks about tolerance, etc. On Friday, we have Muslim assemblies where a Muslim cleric talks about harmony between the different religious groups (Interview, January 2019).*

In an Islamic class held the day after the Dusit attack, Philip, the IRE teacher, stated the following:

*In the Dusit attack, Al-Shabaab actually targeted Muslims. It is important not to associate Muslims/Somalis with Al-Shabaab. The media also give the wrong impression of this. I think that this is something that needs to be challenged as well. Have you ever heard the statement, 'we can agree to disagree?' We can have different opinions, but at the end of the day we can still be friends (Observation, January 2019).*

Philip talked for about 10 minutes on this topic, but he did not ask any questions of the students, who sat there quietly.

When I asked Philip about the aforementioned lesson, he replied:

*Yes, I talked about the Dusit attack completely freely. In Kenya we are of course used to terrorist attacks happening. I can even influence them positively in that regard in terms of countering negative attitudes. Since I have been at this school, there have not really been any cases of radicalization (Interview, January 2019).*

Philip's narrative in the classroom and his response in the interview later on addressed the attack in terms of diminishing misconceptions about Muslims' attitudes towards the terrorist attack and that Muslims were also targeted. Philip clearly wanted to mitigate tensions and divisions and, as he stated, 'counter negative attitudes'. This was simultaneously an attempt to promote cohesion in the class.

Anne, a history and government teacher at the same school stressed the importance of inclusion:

*What we are doing, which is working, is focusing on integration. For instance, we have mixed classes with a lot of Muslims, Christians, Somalis, etc. We also have a mix of different prefects, which belong to different religious/ethnic groups. I think that is very important in order to prevent violent extremism. That all the students get to know each other (Interview, April 2019).*

This approach is in line with 'intergroup contact theory', which suggests that increased contact between social groups may decrease prejudices and increase empathy between different social groups (Gielen, 2017). There is, however, uncertainty about the long-term effects of contact theory in practice.

According to the teachers' responses in the Islamic Integrated High School, the presence of radical pupil groups made discussion of terrorism a sensitive issue, and it was therefore in some cases avoided, even after the Dusit attack. Contextual information may explain this reluctance: One student who went to this school was the main perpetrator of an Al-Shabaab



attack that killed 152 people at Garissa University in 2011. For Sam, a history and government teacher, it was important to dismiss stereotypes, particularly about Somalis:

*I am a bit cautious about talking about different ethnicities/religions. Especially not saying anything bad about the Somalis. The Somalis can be a bit harsh. I am very afraid to talk about Somalis in relation to the Dusit attack. I have to be very careful not to offend the Somalis in any way. I even tried to minimise the role of the Somalis by stating that there were Kikuyus, etc. involved in the terrorist attack as well (Interview, March 2019).*

As in the secular school, the teachers' methodological emphasis in the Islamic Integrated High School was to create cohesion and diminish stereotypes to stem tensions, which may be important in creating an inclusive environment for every student group in the class. As will be discussed, there is, however, a sense that cohesion and inclusion overrule profound discussions on extremism and controversial topics. This gives the teachers the possibility of avoiding these difficult issues, apparently to the satisfaction of many.

Moreover, some teachers in the secular school also stressed that the inclusion of all the ethnic/religious groups is manifested in the syllabus and in the school textbooks. These teachers stressed that even though the syllabus was shallow, it did not include any discriminatory words or views about any ethnic/religious group.

However, as I found in my document analysis, some aspects of the national textbooks in Islamic Religious Education did indeed reinforce stereotypes. The general objective of Islamic Religious Education is to develop 'respect for and foster harmonious co-existence with other people through tolerance' (Kenya Literature Bureau 2002, p. 96). A chapter in the 'Islamic Religious Education study book' also focuses on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, some sections in this chapter do not appear to promote social cohesion:

*Despite the fact Muslims are to be kind to non-Muslims, they are advised neither to support nor entrust them with their secrets. Allah says in Q.3.118*

*Oh, you who believe! Take not as your Bitanah (advisors, consultants, protectors, helpers and friends) those outside your religion (pagan, Jews, Christians and hypocrites) since they will not fail to do their best to corrupt you, they desire to harm you severely. Hatred has already appeared from their mouths, but what their hearts conceal is far worse. (Islamic Religious Education study book, Kenya Institute of Education, 2010, p. 59).*

Muhammed, an Islamic religious teacher at Gora High School, the Islamic girls' school, said he fully agreed with the statement:

*I have to agree with everything the Quran says. You cannot trust non-Muslims at the same level. You should be careful when dealing with non-Muslims (Interview, March 2019).*

Although Muhammed took a clear stance against terrorism, he clearly presented an 'othering' perspective towards Christians. There is a sense that rather than creating social cohesion and good citizens across religious and ethnic groups, such statements may increase tensions and fuel extremist attitudes. This might be particularly problematic in the Islamic integrated boarding schools, where the students might not get to interact much with other religious communities.

#### *Resilience to violent extremism*

Most of the teachers were hesitant to discuss controversial topics and violent extremism in the classroom.

On discussing extremism in class, Sam, the history and government teacher at the Islamic Integrated High School, stated:

*I couldn't talk about the Dusit attack when it happened in January. I felt that it was not appropriate to talk about it. I didn't want to stir up any bad feelings. If some of the students started bringing it up I would answer, but I would answer indirectly. There were also issues of tribalism in the beginning. People came from different backgrounds. We taught them that they are all brothers as Muslims and that they are all brothers as Kenyans (Interview, March 2019).*

Afnan, the religious teacher at the Islamic Integrated High School, said that he mentioned the Dusit attack and even discussed Al-Shabaab, but he did so in a very careful manner so as not 'to stir up tensions'. He also stressed that Islam is against terrorism:

*We talk to the students in a general manner about topics such as Al-Shabaab, for instance. We don't want to stir up any tensions between the different ethnic groups. I don't feel uncomfortable talking about these issues. I also talk about the Dusit attack and terrorism in general. Islam is against such acts. The religion does not prevent Muslims interacting with other non-Muslims. I discourage them from these kinds of attacks. We also have a section on the relationship between Islam and Christianity. We have Muslims and Christians. We are preparing the kids for life after school. A Muslim is not supposed to be an enemy of other people (Interview, April 2019).*

Anne, the history teacher at Bera High School, claimed that she was not afraid to talk about ethnicity and religion, although she had evidently not been very open about the recent Al-Shabaab attack. Interestingly, she stated that she was more worried about being critical of the political leadership in the country, thus focusing on national cohesion in the polarised Kenyan nation:

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*You never know, there might be spies everywhere... You don't want to say anything bad about the Kenyan leadership. You don't want to be too vocal. Just think about Miguna Miguna, who was deported from Kenya. When you talk about the post-election violence or past elections you have to be very sensitive to the students' feelings. You have to know how to handle it. Because there might have been someone who has been affected... I remember during Moi's time when we couldn't really talk about politics in class. But it's still a bit like this today. It is a bit restrictive. The same with the Dusit attack. There were still people affected (Interview, April 2019).*

What attracts people to violent extremist groups was not addressed in the visited schools, although it seemed important to discuss this after the Dusit attack. By not discussing controversial topics, the teachers may reduce the risk of negative reactions or provocations, and thereby promote social cohesion, at least in class, but may at the same time leave a void for critical analysis with unknown consequences. This approach seems to be in contrast to research, which suggests that developing resilience to violent extremism occurs best through critical thinking and open discussions. Through seeing things from different perspectives, the students will be better able to detect flaws and manipulations of different sources and to counter extremist narratives. Online information is easily accessible, and by building resilience, students will be better able to critically scrutinise different information (Sjøen & Jore, 2019; UNESCO, 2017).

*The curriculum/syllabus does not encourage teachers to discuss controversial topics*

Admittedly, the Kenyan curriculum does not support extensive teaching about extremism and religious conflicts, which, according to Anne, the history teacher at Bera High School, 'is a bit rigid and it is a bit restricted. It is restricted what you can talk about, and it is just too exam-oriented. Moreover, the textbooks are not very helpful either'. Anne went on, saying:

*The textbooks don't go a lot into the different ethnic/religious groups. It is a lot up to the teacher how they want to talk about this topic and how deep they want to dig into ethnic/religious conflicts. The textbooks just touch the surface. There is not really a lot about conflict management skills in History and Government (Interview, April 2019).*

Phillip, the Islamic religious education teacher, stressed:

*There are also things that need to be done with the syllabus. It is too shallow; it does not really go into difficult topics like racism, xenophobia, stereotypes, violent extremism, etc. I think the new curriculum will help a lot in that regard (Interview, January 2019).*

However, a spokesperson at the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, who is in charge of 'civic education and advocacy', stated:

*I think the schoolbooks want to focus on the positive sides, and they don't want to stir up any tensions or don't want to glorify or create new conflicts. They want to focus on the positive contribution of the different ethnic and religious groups. For me, I think controversial topics should be brought up in the textbooks, but you have to be very careful how you present the topics. It is also political what has been left out or included in the schoolbooks (Interview, December 2018).*

A spokesperson at the Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development emphasised:

*[I]n the new curriculum, which is under development, terrorism will be included, but I don't know if Al-Shabaab will be mentioned. We don't want to glorify it either, and there are also other terrorist groups. We want to make the topics as positive as possible*

*regarding the inter-ethnic-religious relationship. We don't want to focus on the negative (Interview, December 2018).*

Since there are various forms of terrorism in Kenya, it seems logical to discuss these different forms, and also the possibility of state terrorism. This may also be important in order to challenge the common misconception that violent extremism is always linked to Islam.

At Gora High School, the reason why the Dusit attack was not discussed was that it was not in the syllabus at that time. One of the students, Nazia, had this to say about extremism and ethnic conflicts:

*We don't really learn a lot about conflicts or ethnic/religious conflicts. When we had the terrorist attack, the teacher didn't talk about the background for the terrorist attack, she just said that she was glad we were safe. She doesn't want to waste time. She wants to concentrate on the new syllabus. She has been hearing complaints that we do not go through the syllabus fast enough (Interview, February 2019).*

Sama, another student, confirmed the avoidance strategy used in class and the focus placed on the syllabus and the examinations:

*When the teacher talks about Islam, she only presents Islam in one way. The teacher makes us understand Islam in a better way. You cannot judge someone because they have that religion... No, we don't really talk about contemporary issues in the classroom, and she didn't mention the Dusit attack. She mostly concentrated on the syllabus (Interview, February 2019).*

According to Muhammed, the Islamic teacher, terrorism should be discussed, but only when appropriate in relation to the syllabus:

*In principle, terrorism should also be discussed. It is also important to discuss misconceptions. Terrorism is no good. Islam is a peaceful religion. There are a lot of misconceptions in the Western world. The majority of Muslims do not follow terrorism. However, we did not discuss the Dusit attack in January because it was not in the syllabus. We have to wait until we get to the section on terrorism/jihad before we can talk about the topic (Interview, March 2019).*

#### *Counter-narratives*

Most of the teachers appeared to present a master narrative that limited a more complex narrative structure. There was no actual attempt to address a terrorist narrative on its own terms: They did not, in line with Maan, ‘expose logical fallacies, false dichotomies and metaphoric manipulation’ (Maan, 2013, p. 3). Consciously or not, they focused on inclusion and cohesion rather than confrontation and analysis and discussion of the extremists’ underlying message. In fact, their approach seemed to be in line with what Hemmingsen and Castro (2017) recommended, since ‘actual evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method of minimizing the impact of narratives and of preventing acts of violence is lacking’ (p. 3).

Only one of the teachers stressed that counter-narratives were integrated in his teaching methods. In the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) class I observed at Bera High School, Phillip underlined that he focused on social cohesion, but that he also concentrated on countering extremist narratives:

*I was working in Eastleigh, where there were many terrorist attacks happening. So that is why I wanted to start classes where they would discuss these issues. I wasn't that concerned about who was being radicalized or what not. I was mostly concerned about teaching about harmony between the different ethnic and religious groups. I started to integrate that in the lesson, and I started talking about different ideologies and how they can reject those demands. It was important to create cohesion in order to avoid that divide. Because there was a lot of tension in the school (Interview January 2019).*

When I asked Phillip, the Islamic religious teacher, how he attempted to discuss the issue of extremism in practice, he stated the following:

*I definitely think it is extremely important to guide and advise the students. Talk to them one to one and in the classroom, guide them with their view, engage with them. Try to tell them the difference between propaganda and the text. Counter the extremist narratives, show them films of terrorist groups and their message, and delegitimise their message (Interview, January 2019).*

He further added, ‘I also think many teachers avoid this because they believe it is a very sensitive topic’.

Even though Sam, the history teacher at the Islamic Integrated High School, stated that he was hesitant to talk about terrorist attacks, he mentioned that he *has* tried to correct some extreme viewpoints in class.

*Some students who came to this school in Form 1 had very extreme viewpoints. Many of them were Salafists. The syllabus has corrected some of those perspectives. We talk openly about these topics in class (Interview, March 2019).*

Through correcting some of these Salafistic viewpoints, Sam seems to be using counter-narratives to delegitimise the narratives of the Salafists. However, counter-narratives, especially *religious* narratives, are perceived as controversial. First, as argued by Ferguson (2016), there is no clear link between radical views and extremist actions. An individual may hold radical views without resorting to violent extremism. According to Gemmerli (2016a, 2016b), counter-narratives also risk having an exclusionary effect, stigmatising Muslims who do not tick the box of ‘moderate Islam’. This practice may therefore infringe on religious freedom. Moreover, a meta study conducted by Carthy et al. (2020) found no evidence that counter-narratives that challenged the theological underpinnings of the extremist narrative were efficient.



However, narratives which focus on grievances such as marginalisation, Islamophobia and discrimination, which extremist groups use in their propaganda machinery, need to be addressed and discussed (Speckhard & Shaykovci, 2018).

Phillip, the Islamic teacher, used teaching methods that were, according to his own perception, quite successful, since he suggested that there had been no cases of radicalization since he first came to the school a year ago. His way of approaching the issue also seemed to be an attempt to confirm the identities of the pupils in class as different from those of Al-Shabaab. In his teaching, he brought up the topic of violent extremism and focused on countering the narratives of the extremist groups, while at the same attempting to create harmony between the different ethnic/religious groups. However, his teaching methods were clearly authoritarian and in line with banking education, which rarely allowed for any dialogue between the teacher and the pupils, and which made it difficult to grasp students' concerns and issues regarding violent extremism. The students merely sat and listened as the teacher spoke. There is reason to question the complete lack of interaction between the teachers and the pupils after such a shocking event as the Dusit attack. Philip also seemed to act contrary to research, which underlines that discussion and critical thinking are vital in stemming extremism (Ghosh, 2017).

Most of the teachers in the various schools observed used a mostly top-down strategy, one that left no room for questions or doubts. Some teachers sometimes had group assignments, where the students gave presentations in front of the class, but this activity did not appear in all of the classes I observed.

As noted, teaching in the classrooms that I visited was heavily influenced by banking education (Freire, 1970). My observations were also confirmed by a Professor in Education at a Kenyan University:

*There is coerced obedience in Kenyan schools, and freedom of speech is not encouraged. The teacher is the centre of knowledge. The learner has to follow the teachers' words. Social studies and human rights are taught in a conservative,*

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*constructivist way. There is a lot of focus on memorising, especially for examination purposes. There is no autonomy to challenge teachers' perspectives. Islamism and Christianity are taught from a historical perspective. If you, as a student, are profiled as a political outsider and are propagating ideas, you have problems ... Any dissenting voices are not allowed. It is important to operationalise the knowledge. Build peoples' capacities. Put the knowledge into operation. This is not really happening in Kenyan schools (Interview, September 2018).*

My observations and the Professor`s' comments signal an enormous pedagogical problem, one which is common in most schools in Sub-Saharan Africa. The focus on examinations and banking education are not conducive to preventing the infiltration and proliferation of extremists' attitudes in class. As noted, such a teaching style is problematic, as trying to transform the students through indoctrination will not make them engage and comply (O'Donnell, 2015). Transformation and questioning assumptions are much more likely to occur through free speech and open dialogue. Hence, Phillip's top-down approach made it difficult, if not impossible, to pick up on the various students' multifaceted backgrounds and the questions and doubts they might have had.

*Social cohesion as an illusion?*

My findings exposed a somewhat contradictory picture of cohesion and religious animosity in schools between teachers and pupils, and even between some teachers. Cohesion and avoidance were the primary goals of most of the teachers, who apparently believed that such a methodological approach would quell extremist sentiments.

As stressed by Phillip:

*Of course, sometimes the Muslims felt uncomfortable using the same bathrooms as the Christians, and someone would write 'fuck Muslims' on the bathroom door, for instance. Some of the Christians would also urinate on the container that the Muslims*

*used for washing, but I think there is a good relationship between Muslims and Christians. There's just a few people who want to make a bad impression (Interview, January 2019).*

However, some of the students, as well as a few teachers, told a more complex story. Form 4 student David had this to say:

*Somalis in the class defend jihad, and it is therefore very difficult for the teacher to discuss this in class. The Somalis can also be very racist. They call us Kafirs.<sup>2</sup> Before, they used to have special washrooms for themselves, but now the principal has decided that they have to use the same washrooms. But they still use different washrooms than us (Interview, February 2019).*

The self–other dichotomy expressed by David contradicts Philip's statements made above, by assuming that the teachers are either not aware of the tensions outside the classroom or that they employ cohesion and a strategy of avoidance to preserve calm in the classroom, which they think will positively impact the pupils outside class.

However, when talking to Anne, the history and government teacher, there was a sense that her perceptions of Muslims were not very positive: 'The Muslims are getting too many privileges in the school. Yes, the Christians feel that the Muslims have too many privileges. I also have a case where a Muslim student wrote 'Kafir' about the Christian students' (Interview, April 2019).

Interestingly, Anne confirmed the tensions between Muslims and Christians by referring to an incident last year when one Christian and four Muslim pupils were expelled. A fight broke out between some Muslims (mostly Somalis) and Christians in the school. Machetes were used, and several students and teachers were injured. Stories such as those told by the student David and the teacher Anne call into question the perceived success of the teachers' attempts to bring

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<sup>2</sup> *Kafir* is a derogatory term used to refer to infidels.

about social cohesion and underscore the existence of extremist narratives – if not apparent in class, then outside class.

There even seems to be a dichotomisation or split in the Islamic Integrated High School between the Somalis and other Muslims, e.g. the Arabs. Ahmed, who is half-Arab and half-Pajudina, confirmed the Arabs' feeling of superiority:

*Arabs feel a bit superior – especially towards Somalis or even black Kenyans. It is just that the Arabs may feel more civilised in the way they eat, for instance. We don't just throw the food in our mouth. But we eat with knives and forks. But I don't think like that though.*

*I have Somali friends, but I don't confide in Somalis. I have other non-Somali friends who I tell my secrets to, for instance. If I tell a secret to a Somali, I cannot trust him not to tell his other Somali friends, because they sometimes speak Somali among themselves, which I don't understand (Interview, March 2019).*

Such dichotomies undoubtedly create tensions in class, although it is hard to say whether they result in extremism and terrorism.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed what teachers in secondary schools in Nairobi consider the best ways to prevent and challenge violent extremism. There is an element of fear among the teachers in all of the schools, which clearly signals an avoidance strategy aimed at mitigating tensions in class. On the basis of the teachers' and students' narratives in all three schools, be they religious or secular, there was a sense that the teachers with a few exceptions did not explicitly counter and criticise the terrorist narratives. The teachers expressed fear that countering extremist narratives directly might cause more confrontations and that some pupils might feel alienated and marginalised. This is in line with some studies that have warned that

counter-narratives risk exerting an exclusionary effect on individuals who do not adhere to certain beliefs, attitudes and/or religious practices (Gemmerli, 2016a, 2016b; Hemmingsen & Castro, 2020; Kundnani & Hayes, 2018). There is undeniably a sense that cohesion and inclusion are the preferred strategy, also in the Islamic integrated schools, but there is little room for critical thinking since the teachers use banking education as a methodological tool. Findings from the schools in Nairobi illustrate ongoing tensions between different ethnic and religious student groups. There is therefore reason to question whether the teaching methods being used, which repress critical thinking and do not encourage students to express their opinions, are sufficient to promote cohesion and resilience to violent extremism. While using religious counter-narratives in the classroom might not be an optimal solution, opportunities must be available in the classroom to discuss these issues without necessarily directly countering the extremist narratives.

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