Hiding in the classroom: How neo-Nazi leaders prepare their children for schooling

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Abstract
As part of the general curricular ambitions of contributing to the development of a democratic society, Swedish schools are mandated to actively combat racism and extremism. This causes particular challenges when teachers encounter students who have been brought up in environments where racist and extremist worldviews dominate. This study analyses four Swedish neo-Nazi leaders’ experiences of schooling and how they have utilised these experiences when establishing an approach for their children’s schooling. The focal point of the analysis is the ideological dilemmas that arise from clashes of conviction among neo-Nazi leaders, their children and the teachers. The results show how neo-Nazi leaders use their own negative experiences of schooling to prepare their children on how to escape both democratic education and prevent social stigmatisation.

Keywords
Neo-Nazis, democratic education, schooling, parenting, childhood

Introduction
Following the Second World War, Swedish schools were tasked with actively combatting racism and prejudice (SOU, 1948, p. 27). Because of European experiences with the rise of fascism and racist ideologies, this became a prominent factor in school reforms in the post-war period. The curriculum has been revised and updated several times since this initial reform to accord with recent developments and various forms of racism and prejudice present in different periods (i.e. when Sweden started welcoming immigrants being employed by large industrial companies or when refugees arrived from South America, Asia and the Middle East).

Partly because of these reforms, from the 1950s, Sweden’s education system has been seen as both a beacon for democracy and human rights and an effective defence against ideas, ideologies and movements considered as threats to democratic governance (Englund and Englund, 2012).
However, the rise of the neo-Nazi movement and the skinhead subculture in the 1990s posed a particular challenge for schools, especially where these movements were most active. The role of schools in combatting these ideas is well known, with previous research identifying a clear geographical pattern in the reproduction of right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi strongholds in existing strongholds, even if the reproduction mechanisms are largely unknown (Cantoni et al., 2019; Ezekiel, 1995, 2002).

Some studies have analysed attempts to counteract the passing on of far-right ideologies by educating students about these issues in areas where neo-Nazi ideologies are most present (e.g. Carlsson and Fangen, 2012; Mattsson and Johansson, 2021). Most of these studies focused on the so-called ‘skinhead era’ (between the late 1980s and the turn of the millennium when neo-Nazism was generally associated with skinheads behaving in a violent, rowdy manner). During this period, it was common for young people to join these milieus during their early teenage years, when they still were students in secondary school. Today, the average age for joining the neo-Nazi movement is 25–30 years old (PST, 2019). Thus, we can no longer talk about the prevention of right-wing extremism in terms of stopping teenagers from becoming neo-Nazis. Despite this, there is now an even stronger expectation that Swedish schools should combat radicalisation, not the least with respect to neo-Nazi movements (Mattsson, 2019).

However, we must consider the experience of those who were skinheads at least 20 years ago and who are today both active neo-Nazis and parents. These people were subjected to different forms of intervention during their schooling. Now, they are parents enrolling their children into the compulsory school system, knowing that their children’s teachers are instructed to refute the values and norms that have been foundational in their and often their children’s upbringing. This case study–based analysis focuses on four middle-aged active neo-Nazi/right-wing extremist leaders in Sweden, their perceptions of their own schooling and how they have used their experiences in regulating their children’s education. These individuals are well recognised as outspoken neo-Nazi leaders with prominent positions in far-right movements and have one or more children who attend, or have attended, the compulsory school system.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do active neo-Nazis describe their own experiences of schooling?
2. How do active neo-Nazis raise their children considering schools’ goal to prevent racism and promote democracy?
3. What conclusions can be drawn for future pedagogical interventions against racism and right-wing extremism?

The following sections review previous research, outline the study’s theoretical framework and methodology, present the results and analyse the main findings.

**Literature review**

In regard to pedagogical interventions and teachers’ efforts to intervene and prevent far-right radicalisation, it is difficult to concretely define what constitutes intervention. This is partly because teachers themselves often do not perceive and define their efforts as interventions but as ongoing pedagogical challenges and didactical choices, which are mobilised to respond to situations as they occur. Davies (2016), who studied efforts to counter violent extremism in education systems, claims that established social practices that lead to undesirable behaviours and attitudes cannot be changed with any quick fix. She describes that the only effective approach is to loosen up the problem space
to permit a broader range of options for action to emerge. She is critical of centralised, undifferentiated policies based on outdated ideas that students can be inculcated with predetermined values. Instead, she suggests that knowledge and understanding, which are deeply rooted within the social practices, need to be revised.

In alignment with Davies (2016), Oser et al. (2006) show that pedagogical measures to prevent recruitment to right-wing extremist milieus will fail if they focus upon ideologies and values. They argue that racism is situated within social practices and structures and that prevention must be more than simply singling out individuals who appear to be at risk of far-right radicalisation. Furthermore, Carlsson and Fangen (2012) promote a similar approach that it is important to avoid interventions that pinpoint at-risk students in such a way that the intervention itself creates a negative identity for these students. Furthermore, Kundnani (2015) also argues that many prevention models rest on insufficient empirical data.

Such models are used to explain recruitment to extremist groups and also, supposedly, to identify potential recruits for extremist groups. However, such claims are difficult to substantiate. Moreover, previous research indicates that teachers are reluctant to discuss controversial matters in the classroom unless they feel secure and confident in their approach to these subjects. When faced with these challenges, teachers generally prefer to hand over this task to the various NGOs that engage in educational activities (Skolinspektionen, 2012).

Previous research has claimed that educational efforts have placed too much focus on behavioural issues among students who hold racist attitudes and too little focus on their needs. This leads to a judgemental positioning towards the students that contributes to further fuelling racist attitudes (Ezekiel, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2003). Mattsson and Johansson (2020) show that schools often play a negative role in students’ life trajectories and the radicalisation processes that lead them to right-wing extremism and neo-Nazism. Moreover, previous studies have indicated that schools unintentionally contribute to the reproduction of extremist and racist attitudes. The reason for this is that children raised in racist homes tend to have racial gaze and speak racist language, which might get them into conflicts with peers and teachers. When schools handle such conflicts in a confrontational way, it sustains the development of a racist identity, that is, students start to see and articulate themselves as racist in relation to being compelled to defend themselves.

This study considers the generational effect of schools’ engagement in the prevention of right-wing extremism. It is the first such study to analyse how students targeted for pedagogical interventions because of their right-wing extremist views have made use of these experiences when raising their own children and preparing them for schooling.

**Ideological dilemmas and controversies**

This research is based on transcribed interviews with four informants. The interviews are biographical accounts of how the informants talk about their past and derive meaning from their experiences in relation to their current lifestyle.

The concept of self-identity is very helpful in understanding and contextualising the transcripts (Giddens, 1984, 1991). The informants developed their identity through a self-reflexive process, based on significant relationships and societal norms and expectations. As well-known neo-Nazis, they uphold ideas that contrast with generally accepted societal norms. This disparity of norms has created frequent social dilemmas throughout their lives.

Social dilemmas can arise in various situations. However, in this study, social dilemmas are not to be understood as dilemmas in the outcome of a choice. Billig et al. (1988) claim that social dilemmas cannot be reduced to a choice, but they arise from societal norms that set the context for decision
making. Thus, the dilemma is not about deciding between different choices but acting in accordance with expectations based on social norms. These norms change over time and vary between different contexts and societies. *Social dilemmas* should, in this sense, be understood as *ideological dilemmas*. Ideologies, according to Billig (1991, 1996), are to be understood as messages being conveyed and accepted as common sense in a particular context.

Thus, it becomes necessary to distinguish between *lived ideologies* and *intellectual ideologies*, the former being experiences of conveying messages that pass as common sense and the latter, a system of political, religious and philosophical thinking. Billig et al. (1988) note that in this circumstance, a *political dilemma* will arise in the clash between *lived ideologies* and *intellectual ideologies*. The clash occurs when the utopian vision, which is embedded into *intellectual ideology*, and the practicality, which contextualises *lived ideology*, cannot be bridged – when the *ideological message* cannot pass as common sense.

Another relevant research field that has theoretically informed this study concerns the teaching and educational discussion of controversial issues. The span of topics within this field is wide, but the majority of the studies focus upon the teaching of social sciences (Camica, 2008; King, 2009; Swalweel and Schweber, 2016; Zimmerman and Robertsson, 2017).

Hand (2007, 2008) states that it is useful to distinguish between three different forms of controversy. The first form arises from a lack of knowledge, which can lead to misunderstandings under what he labels *behavioural controversies*. These can be addressed by providing relevant information and through education. The second arises from a clash of values and norms, resulting in *political controversies*. This is the result of private norms that are not aligned with the liberal democratic system that has informed the development of the curriculum used in educational systems. The third controversy arises when strong, opposing positions can be taken due to a lack of methodological means to provide undisputable knowledge, referred to as *epistemic controversies*. Hand (2007, 2008) suggests that this labelling could help orientate teachers on what sort of controversies they are handling as this theoretical structure provides clear terms for identifying and analysing a range of convictions and behaviours.

**Methodology**

All four informants became active in the neo-Nazi movement when in secondary or upper secondary school. Three were around the age of 50 and one about 40. They all completed their education during the late 1980s or the 1990s – during the skinhead era.

The informants were asked to take part in individual in-depth interviews, which lasted for about one to one-and-a-half hours, about their experiences of schooling, both as students and parents, in relation to their controversial worldviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed; the excerpts presented in the article have been translated into English in a way to convey the original use of linguistic nuances, such as class, style and taste.

Since the informants were naturally expected to reinterpret and reconstruct their memories in relation to their current needs and the surrounding social settings, their statements cannot be taken at their face value (Adams, 1990; Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). Therefore, the transcripts were thematically analysed and individual statements were compared to search for similarities and discrepancies (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire.

The study adopts a case study format because it concerns retrospective recollections of the neo-Nazi leaders’ schooling experiences and how they communicate these to their children. Their narratives cannot be seen as a single entity, nor are the experiences observed in real time, which narrows the scope for comparison (Salkind, 2010). The possibility for comparison therefore lies
within the similarities and differences between the four informants’ renditions of their lived ideological experiences – how they give meaning to their own actions, their perceptions of actions taken by schools and the consequences they envisage from their parenting approach. The analyses do not reveal causal factors for behaviour but act as analytical resources for understanding causal patterns (Denscombe, 2014).

The study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines of and received ethical approval from the Swedish Research Council (2017). The participants consented to taking part, and they were informed about the aims and purpose of the study, how the data would be recorded, stored and used and that they could choose not to participate at any time. Any data that could reveal the identity of the participants were omitted or anonymised. For ethical reasons, the exact age is not given as the participants were selected from a very small number of possible informants. However, since their ages are of relevance to the reader, an approximate age is provided.

Results: Hated students and caring fathers

This section presents four cases, each providing an analysis of the informants’ accounts of their experiences of schooling, followed by their reflections on how these relate to their children’s schooling.

Mikael

Mikael is a father of two children who were attending middle school and high school at the time of the interview. He was a skinhead during his teenage years and claims that when and where he grew up, it was not uncommon to be a skinhead, so he did not feel particularly abnormal at school. However, he noted that he regularly engaged in debates with his teachers:

It [his schooling] was during a time when many people were openly nationalistic. So, it was not all that bad but there were definitely debates. It was all this fear about our opinions. People could not understand what I was thinking. There were a lot of misunderstandings; I guess that is the story of my life. […] It did upset me, however, that you would get lower grades because of this [his personal convictions]; I mean, from teachers that openly did not approve of your convictions. There was a particular teacher in social science that I repeatedly had debates with. […] I did well on all his tests because I really liked the subject, but I still got a poor grade, much poorer than my classmates who did not perform as well as I did in the tests. For me it is clear that your grades will be affected by your opinions, and this has always made me very upset.

According to Mikael, he was not able to convey his message to either his teacher or his classmates, who were not active in the skinhead milieu. Still, he found it worthwhile to continue debating with his teachers, at any cost, since he always wanted to be true to his beliefs and not conceal his convictions. He also says that he felt compelled by his peers in the movement to stand his ground. Thus, the price he paid in the classroom was for recognition from within the movement. In the ideological dilemma, he could have chosen to convey a message that would have passed as common sense, but then he would have been forced to phrase his arguments differently and distance himself from the neo-Nazi ideology. Instead, he chose to remain true to the ideological utopia.

Mikael lives with his wife, who is also active in the movement; therefore, the children are evidently being raised within a National Socialist environment. As one of the top leaders in the neo-Nazi movement, he is well known locally by his neighbours and his children’s teachers. He has had a
lot of time to reflect upon how to guide his children and their behaviour at school, and towards their teachers and classmates, stating that he is not eager to push his children into engaging in debates with their teachers:

Michael: You know, I do not want them to argue with their teachers and debate these things [neo-Nazi convictions] in school. I want them to live, you could say, sort of two different lives. I cannot keep them from all my political views for the simple reason that I must be able to talk in my own home. However, they must understand that a lot of the things I say are controversial and it is not recommended to talk about those things at school.

Interviewer: Why?

Mikael: Because then, it might happen that an evil teacher will mince [diminish] them. I am afraid that that could lead them to think ‘Dad might be wrong; this is not what Dad said; is it really the teacher that is wrong or is it Dad’? Then they will get into a conflict that I do not want to put them in. I have said to my children that they do not have to defend me or my opinions, which is my own duty.

Mikael fears that he puts his children at risk and that they will sense a need to defend their father. Having his children defending him would be disparaging to him and also lead to his children developing a distrust of their father, or they might come to the conclusion that his opinions contradict those of their teacher and are inferior.

Mikael sees himself as being in an awkward situation as he is well aware of societal norms and how one is expected to express oneself. He talks proudly of being able to talk back to teachers during his own schooling even if he claims that he had to pay a price for his actions by receiving lower grades. It is his understanding that the school punished him for not accepting the ideological foundation of the Swedish school system. This has become a lived ideological experience for Mikael, which, in turn, presents a repeated ideological dilemma for his own children in their schooling. He does not want his children to find themselves in the same situation, and he does not want them to have to choose to rely on either his worldview or that of their teachers. He even says that he is allowing, or perhaps instructing, his children to live two different lives – one at home and one in school. The ideological dilemma here lies within the risk that his children will be in the same situation if they talk back to their teachers as he did, but also that there is a risk that his children will accept the ideology of the school and thus turn against him.

While it was a long time ago that Mikael left the skinhead subculture, it remains a large part of his identity. This is revealed by how he talks about the mainstream society that has presented him with an unsolvable conflict between remaining true to his neo-Nazi ideological utopia and conveying common sense messages in democratic schooling.

**Magnus**

Magnus is a father of two grown-up children who have left upper secondary school for higher education. Magnus was brought up in an academic family with the expectation of continuing in that tradition. He became a writer for the movement early in his life but was never interested in the subcultural milieus. He claims that he identified with Swedish youth that fell victim to what he refers to as ‘immigrant violence’ – that is, immigrants attacking non-immigrant Swedes. He noticed that it was difficult to talk about these matters in the classroom:
I noticed that there was a hollowness in school. There were things you could not talk about. You could not talk about immigration or question immigration, because then you were a racist. There was a hysterical attitude of political correctness already during the 1980s and I believe that it got worse during the 1990s, particularly when it comes to schools.

Magnus does not recall that he was punished in any formal sense for his opinions, but that punishment came later in life. He continues to talk about how he gradually found it more and more worthless to discuss controversial issues with teachers. As he saw it, there was no willingness to engage in a discussion based on factual content. Instead, the approach adopted was to treat Magnus’ opinions as a behavioural issue.

At the turn of the millennium, he was well known across Sweden for his political engagement. This led to him having second thoughts about what his reputation did to his family. Magnus therefore decided to leave Sweden before his children started school, largely to escape his reputation. Still, he was and remains aware that his opinions will also be controversial in other Western democratic countries. Even if he is not publicly known in his new country, he still needed to give his children advice on how to behave in the classroom when topics that might be controversial were being discussed. He stated that:

It is always uncomfortable to grow up with a parent that holds controversial ideas and engages in political debates. You can never be at ease; It will never be laidback. I would not say that I have insisted that they [his children] think and see the world completely like I do. […] You could say that I have... [prepared them for discussions of controversial topics at school] well [but], you know, there are certain things that are sacred today in society and cannot be discussed. One must know that one must be careful if wanting to question these things in the wrong connection [outside the movement]. It may be anything from a certain aspect of the history of the 20th century to whether immigration is something naturally and good. There is a time and a place [to talk about these things]. This is not a political strategy; It is common sense. You have to learn to pick your fights.

Unlike Mikael, Magnus did not want to speak up in the classroom. He comes from an upper-class family, such that it could be expected that he saw the ideological dilemma as being more costly as talking back to his teachers about controversial issues and denouncing democracy would jeopardise his and his family’s social position. Eventually, he did engage in the movement but when he became publicly known, he decided to safeguard his children from the effects of his activism and degree of political engagement.

Being a father and a right-wing extremist is a political dilemma in itself, but this is particularly true for upper-class people, being forced to choose between abandoning political convictions and losing their social standing. Magnus claims that he is not persistent in conveying his worldview to his children, but he is well aware that they might get into uncomfortable situations if they talk and discuss matters such as the Holocaust or immigration in social settings in the way they do at home. He did not recognise any particular agenda among teachers, largely considering them as loyal servants of a powerful elite with whom discussion of controversial matters should be avoided.

Sven

Sven is divorced and shares custody with his ex-wife over their child, who currently attends primary school. Sven was already active in a neo-Nazi organisation during his teenage years but was never a skinhead. He found the skinhead milieu repulsive and was only ever on the outskirts of the
movement. Today, however, he holds a prominent position within the movement, and the national media know him well. This has caused him a lot of troubles, including the loss of several jobs and the breakdown of his marriage. Locally, he is also well known and his child’s teachers are aware of his activism. Sven was brought up in a family living within a religious cult. In this sense, Sven was used to upholding non-standard opinions, beliefs and ways of life and states that he was encouraged to engage in debates during this time. He states:

My deviant political belief did not make my teachers treat me differently than they already did. […] In the ninth grade, I got into a real fight with all the teachers in my school. We were to produce a film and I took a leading role in this. We wanted to produce a picture against the establishment. It went so far that the teachers threatened to bring up the issue with my parents and asked me if I was prepared for that. This made them [his teachers] really upset because of my view that the entire educational system was built on the premise of homogenising people to become indifferent democrats.

To Sven, this was not a major issue, even if it was patronising to contact his parents to discuss what the school saw as a behavioural problem. His parents were used to being seen as outsiders and did not pay much attention to this. These events shifted Sven’s focus from the religious cult in which he was raised towards the nationalist movement. For several years, Sven built a career and lived a regular life not being a part of the religious cult or any neo-Nazi movement. As a middle-aged man and a father, however, he decided to become engaged in the movement once again but chose not to openly disclose his name or face. When he was identified, he decided to commit fully to the movement, which had drastic consequences for his family and meant that he had to consider how to prepare his child for attending school:

I do my best to teach [gender omitted for ethical reasons] to stand one’s ground, never to allow anyone to gain the upper hand on you; listen to what people tell you, [and that] just because a teacher says something does not mean that it is true, what is said in the classroom or on TV is not necessarily the truth, [and that] those things need to be checked. Teachers and other authority figures will always have their own agendas. They want to shape people in a particular way, but that does not need to be the truth. Rather, their purpose is to get what is best for them. I try to keep it on such a level that [gender omitted for ethical reasons] is not being brainwashed. I just want [gender omitted for ethical reasons] to be awake. At the same time, it is my purpose to implant distrust [so] [gender omitted for ethical reasons] will not believe anyone [from the system] [and] that one needs to trust only in oneself. It depends on what they are talking about in school – if they talk about LGBTQ issues or, so to speak, certain religions [Judaism], I will have to explain it back home.

Sven’s child is still very young and will not reach adolescence for several years, at which time they will be expected to become more independent. He has paid a significant price for his activism and regrets how it has affected his child. He is not eager to ask his child to stand up for his values in the classroom. Instead, he wants to ensure that central aspects of the curriculum that are contradictory to the neo-Nazi worldview are actively reinterpreted at home. Sven is well aware of the curriculum and simply asks his child what was taught at school to provide an alternative curriculum at home. The overarching strategy is to instil a distrust of the system, and then to directly cover important topics as they arise. In this sense, Sven has developed an alternative strategy for handling the ideological dilemma of raising a child as a neo-Nazi in a democratic school system. He hopes to help his child avoid the lived ideological experience from schooling that would develop if the values
taught at home were discussed in the classroom but, simultaneously, remain true to the neo-Nazi ideology.

_Ulf_

Ulf is a father of four children from different relationships, ages are not mentioned to all his children due to ethical reasons. He has been a well-known nationalist in the neo-Nazi movement since his teenage years. He has tried to leave the movement on several occasions due to the hardship his activism caused his family but has remained in the end. Today, he is one of the leading publishers within the movement. His own schooling became compromised when he came out as a Holocaust denier and a neo-Nazi activist when in secondary school.

It was a very different period compared with what it is like today. I think that the nationalist movement resurfaced back then out of a vacuum and nobody was prepared and no one knew how to act [in school]. Some teachers were very hostile, no doubt about that, [but] there were others who were more interested and willing to discuss [and] understand [ideas]. […] The school decided to send a letter to all parents in which they warned about signs that their child could have racist opinions, [and the] different symbols and sorts of music one should be aware of, and why this was a major concern and what could happen if their child was drawn into these communities. I decided to write a short article in the local newspaper on this matter. This got me into a dispute with the school and one teacher in particular.

This dispute that Ulf describes was the first of several arguments and public clashes between him and the school. This continued for several years and ended up in a high-profile courtroom trial. These clashes brought Ulf deeper into the movement, such that it would be fair to say that the school largely drove his radicalisation. Now, as a father, however, he has a quite different take on how his children ought to act in school.

I have never tried to impose my own values on them, so I have not been too concerned about school, with some exceptions. […] When they come home from school and talk about things that I really do not accept I have felt compelled to oppose [what they have been taught]. Overall, I have not tried to impose more propaganda than the school has done; [In fact, it is] the other way around [and it is] actually the school that has imposed their propaganda. […] My children have, of course, after discussions at their preschool, tried to preach to me that all humans are equal in value. Then I explain that this is not true. […] I have not been forced to debate too much [with his children]. As the reality develops, people are becoming aware that the situation [regarding multicultural society] is not all that good, so I do not need to engage all that much.

Ulf is more confident than the other informants that, in the long term, the school will not be able to uphold, as he sees it, its multicultural doctrine. Ulf is also the informant who arguably paid the highest social price during his time at school in opposing his teachers over controversial issues. During that time, he became increasingly detached from societal norms and became less interested in ideological dilemmas, simply isolating himself from society by living with peers and being financially supported by the movement. He is also notable in how he educates his children as, according to his statements, they do not share his worldview to the same degree as the other informants’ children, with Ulf not seeing any particular need to encourage his children to resist their school’s teachings. At the same time, he does explain to his children that they need to take notice in discussions about human rights. To Ulf, the ideological dilemma is less clear and he is convinced
that the democratic system will collapse, with those who believe in it having to face a *lived ideological experience* similar to his as the new social outsiders.

It is evident that there are significant differences in how the four informants talk about their own experiences of schooling and how they talk about their approach to their children’s schooling. They have drawn differing conclusions from their past, but have all seemingly made use of their experiences to prepare their children.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study’s informants attended school in a period when right-wing extremism was represented very differently within society to today. In the 1980s and 1990s, the current third-largest party in Sweden – the Swedish Democrats – was not allowed into Swedish schools to provide political information, as other parties were during national elections. The sole reason for this was that they were seen as a right-wing extremist party opposing the foundation of the democratic mission of the Swedish educational system. Swedish Democrats, neo-Nazis, skinheads and other such groups were seen to represent ideas that were intolerable and contradictory to the overall aim of the Swedish national curriculum to foster democratic values, tolerance and equality. Today, the Swedish Democrats have distanced themselves from their roots and, from the neo-Nazi movement perspective, are seen more or less as a mainstream party.

The informants all describe how they got into debates during the teaching of human rights, history and religion courses when their worldviews collided with the content of the teaching. It is reasonable to assume that the actions taken by teachers, as described by informants, were based on an internal analysis of why the informants acted in this way, potentially also recognising a responsibility towards other students who were offended by the informants’ opinions and a duty to follow a curriculum that instructed them to stand up for democratic values and beliefs. However, it seems that, at least in the cases analysed here, these teaching strategies backfired and to some extent contributed to the further radicalisation of the informants.

A prominent insight gained from this study is how the informants’ experiences at school have helped them to develop strategies for opposing social and political norms whilst simultaneously living within mainstream society. In their accounts, the informants generally do not regret getting into debates with their teachers, but are still upset over being treated unfairly, as they see it. Their experiences of the *ideological dilemmas* that they faced in the classroom – that is, the possibility of establishing ideological difference and balancing being true to one’s convictions against the individual cost – were commonly not positive. However, they claim they were compensated for this by the classroom becoming an arena where they articulated and stood up for ideas and values in front of teachers and peers and thus gained recognition within the neo-Nazi movement. As informants describe in their interviews, both they and their teachers lacked preparation for this situation in Swedish classrooms of the 1980s and 1990s, with informants lacking any role models to follow to understand how to act as neo-Nazis in school.

Their debates in classrooms appear to have prepared the informants to play out identities as nationalists and neo-Nazis. Indeed, it also appears that teachers considered their actions as being those of adolescents seeking identities and perhaps thought that these beliefs would pass, thereby seemingly contributing to their radicalisation. These experiences of confrontations with teachers can be understood as a starting point for constructing, developing and mastering a new *self-identity* as active neo-Nazis.

While Hand’s (2007, 2008) research suggests that the teachers considered such actions as *behavioural controversies* – that is, that the informants lacked sufficient knowledge and thus should
be confronted, corrected and contained, the empirical material gathered by this study demonstrates that a separation between actions as behavioural or political controversies was largely implausible and that aspects of both were recognised. Certainly, however, a better outcome would have emerged if the teacher had been able to gain insight into the political controversy dimension of the clash and avoided escalating the debate to the point of pushing the informants closer to their neo-Nazi peers, which became their lived ideological experience.

The ideological dilemmas of being a neo-Nazi that developed in the informants’ classrooms in the 1980s and 1990s still provide them with direction when raising their children. In their minds, they can anticipate how the school will react and thus prepare their children on how and when to engage in discussions on controversial issues (if at all). Overall, the informants have no desire to see their children undergo the same stigmatisation that they experienced.

However, they do implement different strategies in pursuit of this goal. Mikael expressed fears that his children might find themselves in a situation where they would have to choose between him or their teachers, Sven stated that he is eager to provide alternative lessons on the subjects taught in school and encourages his child to mistrust teachers, while Ulf and Magnus appear more laidback, trusting that their children will navigate a path to developing an ideology favourable to their own. This is most likely a result of their children’s differing ages: Ulf and Magnus have grown-up children and thus have experiences of their children passing through the school system. At the same time, it should be noted that they have all either been forced or elected to withdraw from society in various ways and live within a subcultural sphere. On the surface, it may appear that they are avoiding the stigma of being neo-Nazis (and likely this is certainly a factor), but on a deeper level they are avoiding ideological dilemmas by conveying common sense messages and thus compromising their convictions. As fathers of school children, they have been forced out of this subcultural sphere in regard to their children’s education and the lessons that schools are imparting upon their children.

By doing this, these fathers face the risk that their children will be victims of their choices and thus cannot choose their own approach to engaging with controversial matters in school. However, if these children are not willing to pay the price that comes with their father’s decisions, they might turn their backs on their fathers. Recognising this, all the informants have chosen to provide their children with an alternative curriculum at home, although to different degrees and in varying forms.

All the informants deeply mistrust the school system, but have directed their children to adopt a different relationship with their schools and their teachers than their own. They all used school as a means of engaging with the neo-Nazi movement, but now, it seems, they prepare their children to disregard democratic teachings without attracting too much attention. With this strategy, they anticipate that they can raise their children with neo-Nazi values and escape the intended outcomes of a democratic education in school. In other words, they have developed social strategies for enabling their far-right ideology to be passed on at home without their children facing the consequences of the ideological dilemmas they themselves faced.

However, care should be taken not to draw definite conclusions on the basis of this very limited empirical material, as this study only contributes case-level nuances to the approaches adopted to the teaching of controversial issues. Yet, the analysis appears to demonstrate that the situation has changed. The controversial ideas of fathers being educated in the 1980s and 1990s were commonly considered as being refutable by imparting proper knowledge. Instead, debates fostered the fathers’ identities as nationalists and neo-Nazis whereby ideas did not form the root of identity, but instead the relationship between articulating one’s ideas and the reception received by the listener became the main driver of identity. These days, it is more likely that teachers will frequently encounter students upholding ideas that traditionally have been seen as right-wing extremist beliefs but with
the difference that children are more likely to have been instructed by their parents to avoid engaging in discussions of these topics. Therefore, in a society where politics normalises racism, it is natural to ask whether schools are adequately prepared and have learned from the last 30 years to withstand racism. Particular in a society in which racism is becoming gradually more normalized.

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