

The discursive constructions of evil and related emotions in Finnish pre-primary education

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Abstract: In this study, we explore how teachers communicate and construct educational ideals concerning evil and emotions to children in the context of Finnish pre-primary education, and how this contributes to the processes of villainification; making out-groups represent evil and/or anti-villainification; contributing to complex understandings of evil. To understand this construction and communication, we focused on a single case that illuminated how two pre-primary education teachers formulated educational ideals concerning evil. For this purpose, we analyzed two data sets by utilizing discourse analysis. The first set consisted of five interviews with the teachers dealing with the topic of evil and education. The second data set included video recordings of two related educational sessions conducted by the teachers with children. The results show that the ideals were constructed and communicated by discursive practices without direct usage of the word “evil”, and these mainly contributed to anti-villainification processes. To prevent a strict binary of good and evil and following polarization in society, more direct exposure of evil is needed in education. In this way, the children can be more aware of the villainification and anti-villainification processes they are involved in through education.

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Introduction

In this study, we explored how educational ideals and related norms concerning evil and emotions are constructed and communicated with children in the context of pre-primary education in Finland. Specifically, we focused on how these ideals and norms contribute to “villainification” (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017), which is the process of simplistically constructing the others and out-groups to represent evil, and/or anti-villainification (i.e., constructing more complex understandings of evil). Exploring evil in education seems important in times of political polarization when others, and not “us”, are often vilified as being evil (Journell, 2024). Instead, to promote more complex understanding of evil and to remedy the division between people, anti-villainification practices that consider both individual and societal culpability are needed in education (van Kessel & Edmondson, 2024). During such polarizing times, even though understandings of evil should be reflected in education and researched in general to gain knowledge of the phenomenon, the topic is often avoided in an effort not to offend anyone (Hunter, 2000; van Kessel, 2019). As a result, there is an overwhelming lack of academic and lay discussions concerning evil in education, and empirical research focusing on the phenomenon is almost non-existent. However, even if the topic is avoided, evil is not erased from education. Instead, it is implicitly constructed, and according to previous studies, individual-related comprehensions of evil are currently formulated through Finnish early childhood and pre-primary education curricula (Kurenlahti et al., 2025), and in discussions

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with older students (van Kessel, 2017). For this reason, to understand the current construction and communication of evil in the education of young children more profoundly, the study of this phenomenon through the analysis of empirical data is crucially important.

Additionally, villainification and anti-villainification processes should be closely scrutinized when it comes to the education of young children as, due to historical trajectories, Western education is often noted to promote dividing and vilifying ways of understanding evil and children (Jenks, 2005; Kurenlahti et al., 2025; Murriss, 2016). In Western societies, children are often understood to be innocent and separate from evil in public institutions, but they can sometimes be constructed as evil in very individually focused ways. The way of comprehending children solely as being innocent can lead to projecting evil onto others in a vilifying manner. In turn, when evil is understood to manifest in the form of an individual child, this understanding can lead to vilifying the child and following harmful and strict child-rearing practices (Jenks, 2005). When children are perceived as evil in Western societies, it is often based on the historical ideas of original sin and Freud's understanding of children as initially corrupted and in need of guidance (Jenks, 2005). Overall, these ideas contribute to understanding children as the "evil Other": developmentally lesser beings who, upon becoming adults, are perceived to still lack goodness and trustworthiness (Murriss, 2016). Hence, they are seen as needing external punishment and discipline to be socialized into adult culture (Jenks, 2005; Murriss, 2016). In this sense, when it comes to a child, the villainification process can also result in strict discipline and punishments due to cultural-historical trajectories informing the sense of evil in education.

To overcome these simplistic and otherizing understandings of children as being developmentally lesser than adults due to their perceived evilness or innocence, research concerning villainification and anti-villainification processes is needed, especially when it comes to the education of young children. In this way, these phenomena can be more profoundly understood and consequently either promoted or prevented in education to avoid the moral divide among people and the strict disciplinary actions aimed at a child who is perceived as solely evil. Also, since the sense of evil is constructed not only by reason but also through emotions and affects attached to evildoers (van Kessel, 2017; Zembylas, 2021), emotional aspects are crucial to be scrutinized when investigating the processes of constructing and communicating evil in education. To achieve this goal and gain novel knowledge concerning education, emotions, and evil, in this study we investigated the construction and communication of educational ideals concerning evil and emotions from the practices utilized by pre-primary teachers who interact with young children daily, including in emotional ways. This approach enables an understanding of how the topic of evil is emotionally communicated in pre-primary education, and how such communication informs processes of (anti)villainification.

In educational research, villainification as a concept has guided studies about a variety of educational situations, in and out of the classroom. Previous studies include educational encounters in places like civil rights centers and museums (Adams & An, 2020), as well as encounters with film and television (Journell, 2020, 2024; Varga & Adams, 2024), and technology (Smits & Krutka, 2024), curricular topics like Holocaust education (Christ et al., 2024; van Kessel & Plots, 2019), histories of anti-Black racism in the United States (Adeniji et al., 2024; Jones, 2024; Wills, 2019), and financial education (Adams, 2024), among other topics. Few studies have engaged with villainification in relation to participant interviews, and, importantly, no studies have focused on interaction with young children. Previous research on evil with youth, villainification, and education has focused on older students (e.g., van Kessel, 2017).

To gain new knowledge of villainification processes and the communication of ideals concerning evil and emotions in the education of young children, we focused on a single case involving the formulation of ideals by the same two teachers. Initially, the first author interviewed two teachers in Finland on the topic of evil and education. After this, she observed two separate educational sessions that the teachers conducted with the child group. In this way, analyzing these two different yet related data sets allowed for a deeper understanding of the communication of ideals concerning evil and emotions, as well as related (anti)villainification processes. The research questions that guided the exploration were: What educational

ideals concerning evil are constructed by teachers during the interviews, and how are these ideals communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions during educational sessions? In the next section, we introduce our theoretical perspectives and the central concepts of the study. Then, we present the materials, methods, and analysis of the study and highlight our findings. Finally, we engage in a discussion with previous literature and illuminate our conclusions.

Theoretical Perspective and Central Concepts

Our theoretical perspective in this study is based on social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and specifically on the discursive construction of reality (Fairclough, 2001; Hjelm, 2011; von Stuckrad, 2013). On this basis, social reality and knowledge are considered to be formulated by social processes and symbolic communication (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; von Stuckrad, 2013). In our study, this symbolic communication is explored by detecting discourses that, as practices of language use, are entangled with affects and emotions and communicate and construct distinct meanings related to comprehensions of evil in the community (Zembylas, 2021).

To understand the discursive construction of educational ideals concerning evil, we approached communities as functioning by the protection and promotion of their moral ideals (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). The construction of educational ideals that concern a moral phenomenon such as evil can be explored by investigating discursive moral commitments in pre-primary education that promote certain goals for right kind of human activity in this distinct context (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). These commitments are manifested as norms and rules of the community that illuminate what can be considered to be ideal moral behavior and emotional expression in different situations and what can be understood as deviation from this in-group morality (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). In this way, in the context of education, moral ideals such as educational goals concerning evil can be understood by studying the discursive construction of the boundaries (norms and rules) that illuminate the ideals by descriptions of in-group behavior and emotional expression. In this study, we understand emotions as culturally and historically constructed phenomena that are informed by the norms and rules of each distinct community (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). From this perspective, some emotions can be understood to be fundamental to the construction of human subjectivity and the reflectivity of the self (Brinkmann, 2018). These fundamental emotions, such as guilt, shame, and grief, can be evaluated based on their appropriateness to every situation, and individuals can be praised or blamed for these emotions as they are expected to be expressed in certain ways in response to specific situations (Brinkmann, 2018). In this sense, the phenomenon of evil can also be accompanied by discursively constructed norms and rules that represent expectations and ideals for certain emotional expressions within the community.

In addition to emotions, affects can also contribute to the discursive formulations of the sense of evil in education (Zembylas, 2021). According to Zembylas (2014; 2021), the construction of evil is utilized by a range of apparatuses, "technologies of affect," such as materials, texts, and discourses, which, when accompanied by affects and emotions, construct the normative in-group (us) and out-group (other) categorizations and good/evil binaries (Zembylas, 2021, p. 223; see also Zembylas, 2014). Following Helmsing (2014) and Ngai (2004), affects and emotions are conceptualized on a spectrum with emotions as "more heightened, more formalized intensities of perception, whereas affects are less formal, less individuated, and less structured" (Helmsing, 2014, p. 129). By the affective technologies, these affects and emotions work together as a means to establish norms and a sense of division between the self and others. As described by Leonardo and Zembylas (2013): "Affective technologies include the mechanisms through which affects and emotions come to be instrumentalized, containing certain social norms and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion with respect to one's self and an Other" (p. 151). What this means is that in education, pedagogies of affect and emotion that are enacted intentionally or unintentionally "are effective ways of anchoring students and teachers in a particular way of life" (Zembylas, 2021, p. 229). A discursively constructed, idealized sense of evil can be anchored by affects and emotions to a subject's understanding of self and others in education.

In this process of the discursive construction of evil, memory, identity, and emotion/affect are

entangled with each other, and memories especially play a crucial part because they are felt and performed in education in a certain way and cannot be separated from emotions and understandings of who/what evil, we, and others are (Zembylas, 2021). This form of the politics of memory cultivates certain affective and emotional memories and directs how certain events and people are perceived and remembered in education. However, this formulation of evil can represent different trajectories in the construction of evil, resulting in different social outcomes—understanding evil as "the other" or as a more complex phenomenon.

To understand these social outcomes, in this study, we scrutinize the formulation and communication of ideals concerning evil and emotions by interpreting them through two separate concepts, each representing distinct ways of constructing evil, namely villainification and anti-villainification processes. In more detail, in this study, "villainification" is understood as a process of constructing individuals as villains through which we "imagine exceptional individuals divorced from their social context, rather than ordinary people enmeshed in their communities" (van Kessel, 2022, p. 347). This process can happen in narratives, historical accounts, political discourses, and our daily lives, and it often serves to separate evil others from our (supposedly) not-evil selves (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). In this process, the technologies of affect separate evil from the good that the in-group represents (Zembylas, 2021, p. 223). By labeling someone else as purely good or evil, these people are constructed in a one-sided way, which oversimplifies who they are, what they have done, why they did what they did, and so on. All their complexity is lost, and they become unlike how we understand the average person. In the villainification process, a key categorization is the "villain"—a person or group who/which is held responsible for a more complex evil process (van Kessel, 2022; van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Identifying a villain can easily have the unintended consequence of neglecting broader culpability.

In contrast to this, anti-villainification as an ethos invites us to consider how evil is perpetuated by ordinary people like ourselves instead of cartoonish evildoers, and in this way, evil is constructed in more complex and nuanced ways. Thus far, anti-villainification strategies have been conceived as using the active voice for verbs and naming those contributing to the evil process, developing ethical questions to consider, discussing human capacities for evil, making villains more relatable, and analyzing resources and situations with students (van Kessel, 2022). In this study, we set out to understand how these villainification and anti-villainification processes are manifested with the construction and promotion of educational ideals concerning evil and emotions in pre-primary education.

Method

To understand the construction and communication of ideals concerning evil and emotions, we invited two Finnish pre-primary education teachers to ponder the topic of evil. The teachers in question were working together with the children during educational sessions and shared similar views on how pre-primary education should be conducted, as they had been working at the same kindergarten for years. Both had also worked as members of the same team and in pre-primary education for several years, as well as in kindergartens for decades. Thirteen children were involved in this study, aged between 6 and 7 years old, and according to the teachers, they all had homogeneous and stable family backgrounds with highly educated parents.

The teachers and the group of children were selected for this study because during our outreach to different kindergartens, these teachers demonstrated a distinct interest in engaging in the topic of evil and education through discussion and reflection. In this sense, they represented both a purposeful and a convenience sample (see Adler & Clark, 2011), because their reflections on evil were easy for the researchers to obtain, due to the teachers' personal interest and willingness to spend time discussing this topic with us. This study employed a qualitative approach focused on a single case, exploring how teachers formulated and conveyed ideals concerning evil and emotions. By engaging qualitatively with the case study, more specific and in-depth information can be gained from complex phenomena in real-life contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Examining a single case involving only two teachers and a group of children offered us the opportunity to understand in more detail the complex phenomena of the construction and communication

of ideals concerning evil and emotions than if we had examined multiple teachers and child groups with the same resources.

In this study, we did not rely on just one data source; the data were collected in two phases. During the first phase, the first author interviewed the teachers on the topic of evil and education five times during the period from November 10, 2021, to January 20, 2022. The duration of each interview was one hour. When conducted thoughtfully, interviews can be understood as valuable sites for exploring discursive construction, functioning as dynamic spaces in which participants collaboratively shape meaning as well as their beliefs and perceptions of reality (Reiter, 2018). In this study, the interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews in Finnish. Some of the questions had been formulated beforehand by the researchers, and some questions were created during the actual interviews, based on the topics and perspectives that the research participants brought up (Adams, 2015). In this way, a space for teachers' personal reflections, beliefs, and viewpoints was created to ensure that they could share ideas that were not already expected by the researchers (see Adams, 2015). From this interview data (in Finnish but translated into English), we analyzed the ideals concerning evil and related emotions by detecting the aims the teachers set for education when it came to evil.

After this, in the second phase, the first author video recorded two educational sessions conducted by the teachers that dealt with bullying and stealing, and which the teachers had mentioned in their interviews. The duration of each educational session was approximately one hour, and the sessions took place during March – April 2022. From this data, we analyzed how the teachers further constructed and reinforced their ideals in practice, and by this, how they communicated their educational goals concerning evil and emotions to children. To conduct our research according to good scientific practice and research ethics, prior to conducting the interviews and collecting the video data, we obtained informed consent from the teachers, children, and their guardians for participation. In accordance with the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice set by the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Integrity, this meant that we did not need to seek a formal approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Helsinki to conduct our study. Instead, the research permit and the ethical approval of the study was granted by the Education Division, City of Helsinki by the numbers HEL 2021-000775 and HEL 2020-009695.

The emotions that are normatively constructed within the child group, especially in relation to evil, can be distressing for children. To mitigate any potential harm caused by the research, the researcher carefully considered their ethical responsibilities and was prepared to stop data collection if the situation appeared distressing for the children. Additionally, both children and adults were advised to inform the researcher if they did not wish to be video recorded in certain situations. Furthermore, the researcher only observed the educational sessions within the child group and did not directly introduce the topics of emotions or evil to the children. In this way, the researcher's influence on the sessions and the handling of these topics was kept to a minimum.

The analysis of the interviews and educational sessions was conducted by discourse analysis, utilizing its critical strands to understand the usage of power in the communication of the teachers' ideals concerning evil (Fairclough, 2001). In our analysis, we focused on examining discursive practices, including the representations and meanings embedded in this recurring language use, and considered the broader social implications and effects of the discourse (Fairclough, 2001). With this approach, we analyzed the practices of language use related to formulations of evil and emotions that are sometimes beyond the research participants' and insiders' perceptions, and, for this reason, need to be analyzed by the external researcher (cf. Alexander, 2003). The initial analysis was conducted by the first author, and later, the second author also took part in analyzing the data in more detail. However, during the analysis, the first author led this process to ensure the consistency of the interpretation of the data.

In our analysis of the interviews, we detected various discourses that communicated distinct meanings, illuminating the teachers' beliefs of educational goals. Discourses about manifesting these goals also represented separate ideals that were set for education concerning evil and emotions. These discourses

were as follows: 1) the ideal of implicit education on evil, 2) the ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in humans, 3) the ideal of reflection on evil and related emotions, and 4) the ideal of distinction between good and evil.

From the video recordings of the educational sessions, we detected and further analyzed discursive practices that reinforced and further constructed these ideals, contributing further to each discourse detected from the interviews. In this study, we understand discursive practices as being recurring language use that mediates meanings, social identities, or subject positions or types of self (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64) that can be understood as installations or effects of power in distinct sociocultural settings (cf. Fairclough, 2001). The relation between the discursive and the non-discursive is dialectical, and therefore the meanings, ideals, and practices that teachers in this study produced were mediated and further constructed through the complex interplay of language and social reality. As we detected different discursive practices, including narrating, appealing, praising, and questioning, we also recognized an affective reality that accompanied these ways of mediating ideals. This entanglement of affect, discourse, and practice has also been recognized in previous research that illuminates that affects accompany discursive practices in the process of mediating meanings (e.g., Wetherell, 2013). In our study, the affective component was evident, as the teachers often did not explicitly state what they aimed for by utilizing their practices, but instead they created a sense and a feeling of the ideals in the child group by instrumentalizing affects and emotions with the discursive practices to reach these goals (cf. Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). After this notion of affects, we understood that the practices were used in the child group as affective technologies that aimed for reaching the ideals and simultaneously illuminated the teachers' discursive usage of power. Finally, we also detected processes of villainification and anti-villainification from our data by analyzing in-group and out-group boundaries in relation to evil.

In analyzing the data from the interviews and educational sessions, we detected the ideals through their recurring discursive nature, and the same ideals were constantly repeated, akin to data saturation. However, as discourses communicate and construct meanings that change over time and in different situations (Hjelm, 2011), complete saturation of the discourses cannot be obtained. Similar discourses that illuminated the ideals were repeatedly detected by the researchers when analyzing both the interviews and educational sessions, and this indicated consistency in our findings between two separate data sources. In this way, our findings concerning the ideals were supported by two different datasets (cf. Carter et al., 2014).

Findings

In this section we will present our findings concerning, 1) what educational ideals concerning evil are constructed by teachers during the interviews and 2) how these ideals are communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions during educational sessions. During their discussions on evil and education, the teachers constructed ideals concerning how evil should be faced and dealt with in pre-primary education. Mainly these ideals contributed to an anti-villainification ethos, as they were aiming to promote the understanding of evil as manifesting in all human subjects and not just in villainous others. The ideals were 1) indirect education on evil, 2) understanding and accepting innate evil in humans, 3) reflection on evil and related emotions, and 4) distinction between good and evil. In communities, these moral ideals can be understood to set boundaries for behavior and emotional expression and require commitments from members of the community (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). In this way, the educational ideals that the teachers were committed to were also communicated to children as in-group boundaries for emotions and behavior when it came to evil.

The teacher's commitment to these moral goals was evident, as our findings show that their ideals were also communicated and further constructed with children as they engaged with the discursive practices of narrating, appealing, praising, and questioning during the two educational sessions. These practices were used as affective technologies, because they were instrumentalized in an affectively provoking manner to require certain body routines, memories, and emotions from the children that contributed to the ideals (cf. Zembylas, 2021). In these discursive practices there were not only emotional

but also apparent affective dimensions at play as less formal and structured aspects of interaction that created certain atmospheres that guided children and their emotions in a subtle way (cf. Helmsing, 2014). The teachers used these affective technologies to promote anti-villainification processes that aimed to include evil in the subjectivity of in-group members. However, we also detected a trace of the villainification process, illuminated later in detail. Next, we have highlighted each ideal separately with some data excerpts to demonstrate our findings.

The Ideal of Indirect Education on Evil

Instead of necessarily talking or thinking about it openly and explicitly, the idea of evil in education is something that can be addressed indirectly, as children are often publicly perceived to be innocent and good in the context of “Western” education (Kurenlahti et al., 2025). The teachers criticized this contemporary approach to education and argued that the current early childhood education was overly focused on good and downplayed the existence of evil. In contrast, during the interviews the teachers constructed their own educational ideals concerning evil that they believed should be promoted in pre-primary education, and by these ideals they also set norms and boundaries for in-group understandings of evil and related emotions (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). One such norm was constructed as teachers defined how evil should be ideally addressed with children. Interestingly, even though the teachers believed that the existence of evil was neglected in education, they argued that the word “evil” could not be used to describe a child when talking to children directly. For example, this was stated by teacher H1 when discussing the usage of the word evil:

In no way; I could not think of saying (to a child) that you are evil.

In this way, the affective setting of dealing with evil was also downplayed by this technology that diminished the emotion-provoking load of using the word “evil” in education and in relation to a child.

Instead of using the word “evil” the teachers thought that children should learn about evil indirectly based on the realization of what is good. In this way, the teachers idealized indirect education on evil in pre-primary education that promoted implicit understanding and a sense of evil. This is shown in the next quote from teacher H1:

Well yes indeed, in that you highlight those good things, and in this way, so then that also in some way gives the awareness about that, that this was good and that other thing was evil, even if you don't, in that way, say it out loud (H1).

What teacher H1 is arguing in the quote is that knowledge of evil is best understood by highlighting the good without stating what evil is. This idealizes indirect education on evil as an educational goal.

During educational sessions, this ideal of indirect education on evil was constantly communicated, reinforced, and further constructed in relation to emotions and evil, as the teachers did not use the concept of “evil” with children but instead narrated wrongdoing to children as “doing unpleasant things” or “acting poorly”. According to Zembylas (2021), affective technologies play a role in establishing divisions between the self and others, as well as in shaping a sense of normative order. In this case, the affective technology of discursive avoidance of the word “evil” and the prohibition of strong emotions and affects related to this phenomenon (see van Kessel, 2017) led teachers to separate themselves and other adults from the children. This was achieved by creating an ideal and following a norm that prohibited the use of the emotionally provoking concept of evil when discussing with and about children.

This ideal is further illuminated when we highlight our other findings, as the ideal of indirect education on evil was constantly present in the context of educational sessions. It is notable that, even though the word “evil” was avoided, the processes of villainification (i.e., an other-focused sense of evil) and anti-villainification (i.e., more complex understandings of evil; van Kessel & Edmondson, 2024) were both manifested by the educational ideals that the teachers constructed and communicated to children. Additionally, by the ideal of indirect education on evil, processes of villainification and anti-villainification were conducted implicitly, as evil was hinted at and not discussed directly.

Overall, the neutralization of evil in pre-primary education was an interesting phenomenon, as the

teachers also believed that at the same time education should promote understanding and accepting innate evil in all humans, as we will show next. In this way, what can also count as evil was indirectly communicated to children without the explicit exposure of the concept of evil.

The Ideal of Understanding and Accepting Innate Evil in Humans

The ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in all humans was constructed by teachers in the discussions and communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions during educational sessions. As the villainification process entails projecting evil onto out-groups that are separated from the good illuminated by the in-group (Zembylas, 2021), the ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in all humans contributed more to the anti-villainification process, in which evil can be understood as an in-group phenomenon and an aspect of everyone's sense of self (cf. van Kessel, 2022). This ideal was based on teachers' fundamental belief that humans are ultimately both good and evil, and this also created a norm for what it means to be a human in relation to evil. Such belief was repeatedly brought up by the teachers in their discussions. This next line from teacher H2 represents this belief:

In all of us there can be found, like good and evil, that all of us humans have a tendency to many, many kinds of behavior.

By this line, evil is connected to the existence of all humans that are also understood to have tendencies for multiple various kinds of behavior. In addition, this innate evil was extended to evil emotions and feelings, as this statement by teacher H2 shows:

Everyone sometimes experiences those evil feelings.

By this statement, experiencing evil feelings is connected to everyone, and evil is also included in the emotional world of humans. Norms of these kinds, which relate to morality, create boundaries for what can be understood as normal in-group behavior and emotional expression (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016).

During the interviews, the teachers also emphasized that these emotions and feelings — and, more broadly, innate evil — ought to be understood and accepted by children. Also, by seeking to promote the understanding and acceptance of innate evil in all humans, the process of anti-villainification was supported by promoting this realization. Evil was believed to be a phenomenon that humans should learn to live with: recognized, understood, and accepted rather than erased completely from education. In this way, the teachers idealized understanding evil and connected evil directly to the learning of the subjects in an educational context. This is captured in the following example from the discussion of the teachers:

1. H1: Even of course, we would want that evil would vanish from the world, but maybe it won't vanish in that way that it gets faded out, mmm. That its existence needs to be understood somewhere, on some level, so.
2. H2: So, in that way, to accept and to learn to live with it, so.
3. H1: Yes.
4. H2: Of course, not by causing suffering but somehow in a way to accept also its, in a way, existence.
5. H1: Yes. And then you can also maybe see that goodness.

This example shows that the teachers idealized the understanding of evil as an educational ideal because it cannot be erased from the world by downplaying it (line 1.). The teachers further idealized the acceptance of evil and connected evil to learning by stating that evil should be learned to live with, and its existence should be accepted, as teacher H2 proclaims (line 2.) and teacher H1 agrees (line 3.). By gaining this acceptance, the teachers also believed that goodness could be possibly seen in the world (line 5.).

During the educational sessions, this ideal of understanding and accepting evil as an innate aspect of humans was communicated to children by the teachers and also further constructed in relation to emotions as the teachers engaged with the discursive practices of narrating wrongdoing, appealing for children to share their wrongdoings, and questioning the lack of wrongdoing in children. In education, such affective technologies can be used to create a sense of evil and define who we and others are, by employing affects and emotions with discourses (Zembylas, 2021). According to our findings, these affective technologies could be interpreted as strategies to incorporate evil into everyone's sense of self and understanding of others in an implicit way. This was conducted according to the ideal of indirect education

on evil, as the teachers narrated acting poorly and unpleasantly to be a part of human existence and dismissed the usage of the emotionally provoking word evil that was used in the discussions during the interviews.

The teachers utilized affective technologies to create a shared sense of evil within everyone's self, instead of projecting evil solely onto out-group members, and hence, the anti-villainification process was further contributed to (cf. van Kessel & Edmondson, 2024; Zembylas, 2021). The discursive practice of narrating wrongdoing was used as a technology in the context of storytelling. Teachers shared their personal experiences of wrongdoing in efforts to build an affectively safe ground and atmosphere for the children to share their own wrong deeds to manifest the innate evil in humans. Also, in general, to create this accepting atmosphere, the wrongdoing was narrated to be a part of everyone's humanity. The next line from teacher H2 highlights how doing poor things was narrated to children as being innate part of all humans. This line was uttered when the teachers used the discursive practice of appealing that aimed to encourage children to share their own memories of wrongdoing:

...we all humans are that kind, that sometimes we do little bit poor things, so that.

By this line the teacher is affectively appealing to the children to share their wrongdoing, as she is narrating to the children that all humans sometimes do poor/evil things, and by this communicates the ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in all humans. However, this is done in an indirect way by avoiding the usage of the word evil in the narration.

In addition to encouraging children to share their wrongdoings, the teachers narrated their own personal memories of wrongdoings to children as they demonstrated that all humans, also teachers, had committed poor or unpleasant things and by this, communicated the ideal of accepting and understanding innate evil in humans. Referring to Zembylas (2021), what is remembered can be used in education as an affective means to resemble who we and others are. In this case, the teachers used their own memories to narrate educational ideals that determined who the subjects are and what they feel in relation to evil. The teachers also required children to share similar memories as they communicated the ideals to children. In this way, memories that supported the ideals were cultivated by the teachers, and this contributed to a certain way of how children and distinct events were remembered, resulting in wanted perception of things in education (cf. Zembylas, 2021).

This next example illuminates how memory-driven narrating was done by the teacher. In this example, teacher H1 shares with the children her memory of stealing a safety pin from a friend. In the discussions, this same memory was highlighted by the teacher as an example of doing evil in childhood, and she said that she often shares this memory with children in pre-primary education. During an educational session, she narrated the memory of stealing to children as follows:

That Tiina's baby doll had that kind of little golden or golden colored safety pin that she could use to tie up the baby's diaper...And do you know what? I thought that it was so fine that safety pin that I stole that safety pin, and then I went home...

In this narration, the teacher first describes how the safety pin was small and golden and so fine that she stole the safety pin and left home. By narrating this memory of stealing, the teacher demonstrated that she also had committed unpleasant things and by this, she communicated the ideal of acceptance and understanding of evil in all humans by the affective means of narrating a personal memory.

Similarly, this ideal was communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions as the teachers engaged with storytelling that focused on narrating wrongdoing and related desires to steal or bully others to create an accepting atmosphere. For example, teachers narrated a story about stealing an egg from a duck that described the act of stealing and the emotions that accompanied this act:

I noticed that there was a duck's nest in a bed of reeds. In the nest there were seven eggs. Those were appealing and beautiful looking. The mother duck was washing up further away, and she didn't see me. I wanted a beautiful egg for myself. I couldn't resist the temptation; I stole one egg and hid it in my pocket.

In this narration, in the same manner as in the teacher's previous memory, the detection of an object

of desire, a fine egg, is described first, and then the following act of stealing is represented after this. In addition, the act of stealing is narrated to be accompanied by the emotional world of temptation and wanting to steal the egg. In this way, the ideal of acceptance and understanding of evil in all humans is also further constructed in an affective manner to comprehend emotions and feelings such as the desire to steal from others and having temptations.

In addition, the usage of the discursive practices of narrating and appealing to children to share their wrongdoings, as well as the practice of questioning, contributed to communicating the ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in humans. This practice created a judgmental and pressure-filled atmosphere and was used by the teacher as the children often hesitated to share their own memories of wrongdoing. One participating teacher (H2) noted how she would encourage a group to see evil-doing as more common and ordinary. This lack of showcasing wrongdoing was questioned by the teachers as this next line from teacher H2 shows:

I can't quiii-te believe that here only Miina, well, has done that (something unpleasant).

This line illuminates how the lack of wrongdoing was questioned by the teacher, as she stated that she didn't believe that only Miina, who had just shared her wrongdoing, could be the only one who had committed unpleasant actions in the child group. In this way, the teacher questioned in an affectively pressuring and judging manner the innocence and sole goodness of children and, by this, contributed to the ideal of understanding and accepting innate evil in ordinary humans as opposed to contributing to the process of villainification that creates an understanding that evil is only perpetuated by villains who are unlike ourselves (cf. van Kessel & Crowley, 2017).

The Ideal of Reflection on Evil and Related Emotions

Teachers believed that children should reflect on their own evil actions and emotions to understand these phenomena and to learn what is good. In this way, norms for good and evil and boundaries of in-group and out-group behavior were constructed (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016). By this, the processes of villainification and anti-villainification were also reinforced, contributing to the in-group and out-group related sense of good and evil behavior. Teacher H1 idealized reflections concerning evil actions in education as she described the educational purpose of doing evil in education:

When someone does something evil and then we talk about that and think about that, that, was this now a nice act, or what did it feel like for the other and, and, what did it feel like for you and well, yes you probably learn to be good in that way.

This line shows that in relation to the evil actions of a child, the teacher idealized reflections as a proper way to counteract in these situations and these reflections could also lead to learning to be good.

The teachers also idealized reflections on related emotions that, in their opinion, should be reflected relating to real-life situations and experiences. The teachers thought that in this way, emotions could be more profoundly understood as they were connected to the context of everyday life. This opinion is shown by the next example from the interview, as teacher H2 described the purpose of educational sessions like those we analyzed for this study. H2 shared that in another session not observed by the researchers, after initial hesitation, the children shared their memories concerning wrongdoings to others and reflected related emotions:

In some way, a little bit at first, they somehow couldn't obviously in front of the others, like, to say, that they have sometimes behaved, like, poorly against the other, but, that then, when someone has courage, so, then there begun to come up, like, from them knowledge about the matter and also, person, personal experiences, that, that, it is like, always important somehow, maybe, in education about emotions, that they can, like, reflect those, like, situations from their own life and not like: "now I will tell you what that hate is."

In this example, the teacher describes how at first, the children couldn't tell others that they had acted poorly towards others, but after someone was brave enough to describe their poor actions, the other children followed suit by telling personal experiences on the matter. After this, teacher H2 idealized this reflection in relation to emotions by stating that in education that concerns emotions, it is always important that children can reflect on their own life situations instead of a teacher telling them what hate is. Reflections

on evil actions and related emotions were idealized as an educational goal, and this partly contributed to anti-villainification processes, as the sense of evil within everyone's subjectivity was promoted through these idealized reflective actions in practice.

This ideal of reflecting evil and related emotions was communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions during educational sessions. Affects and emotions are often instrumentalized by affective technologies that contribute to adjusting people to certain norms (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Adjusting children to the ideal of reflecting evil and related emotions was done by discursive practices that were functioning as affective technologies by encouraging and cheering children to act according to teachers' normative ideal. These practices were used to create an encouraging atmosphere and were manifested as appealing, which encouraged children to remember, share, and reflect on wrongdoings and emotions, and also as praising, which was done to make children feel good after they had shared and reflected on wrongdoings and emotions. In addition, the teachers used the practice of questioning to guide and induce further reflections on the topic.

Appealing, as a discursive practice, was used by teachers as they were directly asking for the children to remember, share, and reflect on their experiences and emotions by encouraging children with such questions as:

Has anything like that happened to you? (H1)

or

That kind of thing that you have done that you have regretted afterward. Can you remember something like that? (H2).

These questions were used to appeal to the children to share their memories, experiences and emotions for joint reflection with teachers and other children. Also, the practice of praising contributed to this ideal of reflection, as the children who were acting in a good and wanted manner by remembering, sharing, and reflecting on wrongdoings and emotions were cheered and uplifted by the teachers in an utterly affective manner. This practice is illuminated by the line from teacher H2 who is praising a child after remembering, sharing, and reflecting:

You were so honest, and in that way, so bravely told us. These are quite important matters.

By this line, the teacher praises a child for being honest and brave, as she has shared her unpleasant actions and values the content of sharing to be important by stating that these are quite important matters.

In addition to praising and appealing, the teachers also used the practice of questioning to induce and guide these reflections with children and simultaneously constructed this ideal in relation to emotions even further. For example, as teacher H1 asked children what a guilty conscience looks like after you have done unpleasant things, she guided and induced reflections to manifest the right kind of embodiment of guilt by the practice of questioning. This is shown in the next line:

Do you smile then? Hmmh, so then you are quite serious looking and maybe a little bit, that kind of sad and blue looking.

In this example, the teacher uses the practice of questioning to guide and encourage further reflections on guilty conscience as an emotion that does not appear as smiling of the subject but as an embodiment that looks quite serious, a little bit sad and blue. In this way, the right way of embodying guilt was affectively determined by this questioning, as the children who could embody a guilty conscience correctly, when the teachers asked what it looked like, were praised for this right kind of expression similarly, as demonstrated before.

It was evident that the practice of questioning set the norms for the appropriate emotional expression of guilt after wrongdoing. In this way, the emotion of guilt, which, according to Brinkman (2018), is fundamentally constitutive of human subjectivity, was normatively defined by the teachers, and hence, the children were evaluated according to the expression of this emotion during educational sessions. This reflection related formulation of the correct expression of guilt also led to villainification process, as

we will show in the next section by illuminating the ideal of distinction between good and evil.

Notably, in addition to embodying guilt, the emotional expression of the victim of the wrongdoing was also guided through reflection by questioning. This guidance directed the victim to look and feel worried and sad in the reflections. In this way, overall, not just the reflections, but the right kind of reflections about emotions and evil were furthered as an ideal during the educational session. These reflections were guided by the ideal of distinction between good and evil.

The Ideal of Distinction between Good and Evil

Teachers also believed that children should learn to set apart good and evil from each other. In this way the educational ideal of distinction between good and evil was constructed during the interviews. This ideal extended to emotions that, according to teachers, should be identified as good or evil and pursued accordingly. Consequently, norms and boundaries for in-group and out-group behavior and emotional expression were also created (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016), reinforced, and further constructed later in practice, resulting in a villainification process. This ideal of the distinction between good and evil emotions is manifested by the next line of teacher H1 that describes the role of evil in education that concerns emotions:

Well, there are those feelings, a little bit like good and evil emotions. Maybe, that you would learn to recognize those then and pursue those good ones.

In this line, the teacher separates distinct good and evil emotions and proclaims that these should be identified, and the good ones are something to aim towards from this basis. In this way, the distinction between good and evil is idealized as it can lead to the pursuit of good emotions.

In addition, teachers believed that evil feelings and emotions were sometimes experienced by everyone, and for this reason, these should be talked about, and education should also give meaning to both sides (good and evil) in humans:

Everyone sometimes experiences also those evil feelings or in a way, like, like, that yes, it is probably important, like, talk and give meaning to both sides of humans (H2).

In this way, constructing the meaning of both good and evil was seen as an educational goal, and this idealized the distinction between good and evil in education. Also, during the interviews, the teachers brought up that they thought that evil could be detected by representations of good, and vice versa, good could be understood by accepting and understanding the presence of evil. Construction of the distinction between good and evil was understood as relational and could be manifested solely by representations of either good or evil.

During the educational sessions, the teachers communicated and further constructed this ideal of distinction in relation to emotions. However, the teachers only gave direct meaning to what is good, and evil was constructed indirectly, because the word "evil" was not used by the teachers. In this way, the ideal of distinction was constructed by the ideal of indirect education on evil, leaving explicit evil undetected. This ideal of distinction that focused on describing what was good, and what was unpleasant or poor behavior, was promoted by the teachers' affectively driven discursive practices that were: 1) narrating good and unpleasant/poor actions, 2) praising children for sharing and reflecting on their experiences in a good manner, and 3) questioning children for sharing and reflecting on their experiences that deviated from good.

The teachers engaged in the practice of narrating as they described to the children what could be considered to be good and what is unpleasant or poor behavior. This narration was done in the context of storytelling, sharing personal memories of wrongdoing, and directly describing the moral nature of emotions and actions to children. The actions and emotions that were narrated directly as unpleasant or poor behavior by the teachers were desires to steal, lie, and bully. Interestingly, during the educational sessions, good was narrated in relation to these unpleasant and poor actions as a way for a subject to act and feel after a wrongdoing. These actions and feelings that were narrated distinctly as good were having a guilty conscience, the desire to say, "I'm sorry", and wanting to make up for unpleasant/poor actions.

The good actions and feelings were affectively reinforced by the teachers who narrated and emphasized them repeatedly as they shared their memories and engaged with storytelling. These good aspects of a subject were also reflected on with the children. The narration of these good actions and feelings is well illuminated by the following example from the educational session as teacher H1 narrated her emotionally backed memory to children, describing how she felt having a guilty conscience and said, "I'm sorry", after stealing a safety pin from a friend:

I started to feel so horrible about that, that I had taken that safety pin and I had not asked for permission, that I was forced to leave to bring that safety pin back to Tiina late in the evening... I said to that Tiina that this is the thing that I took this, your safety pin. I truly said I was sorry about that. That brought to me this horrible feeling when I had taken something that belonged to the other that I was forced to bring it back. I regretted so much about that act; I had a very guilty conscience.

In this example, teacher H1 first tells the children how she started to feel terrible after taking the safety pin without permission, and because of this, she had to return the safety pin late in the evening. After this she tells how she confesses the stealing to a friend and profoundly says, "I'm sorry". In the last sentence of the example, the teacher yet again emphasizes the terrible feeling she had after taking something that belonged to another and how it resulted in wanting to return the safety pin. The teacher also gives meaning to the terrible feeling by saying that she regretted the act of stealing and had a very guilty conscience. This guilty conscience was also narrated in the context of storytelling about the stolen egg; for example,

I stole one egg and hid it in my pocket. In the evening, I started to feel a guilty conscience, and I regretted my action.

In the story this was followed later by the narration of a desire to confess and apologize for stealing. In this way, the ideal of distinction between good and evil was further constructed to comprehend the emotional world of a subject who could do evil but also act and feel in a good (guilt, desire to apologize) or an evil (no guilt, not apologizing) manner after committing poor/unpleasant actions.

This distinction was also communicated and constructed even further by reflections with children. The children who shared the feeling of having a guilty conscience after poor/unpleasant actions were praised and cheered for this way of sharing, as this next example from a reflection on an act of a child who had stolen a paper snowflake from another child shows. Before this example, a child has shared her memory of stealing a paper snowflake from her previous kindergarten, and her teacher asks a question to further the reflection on this wrongdoing:

1. H2: But did it trouble your mind?
2. Child: a little bit
3. H2: But that guilty conscience, that is a great thing in a human. In that way, it is there a little bit blaming you if you do something unpleasant. So, you know that it is then wrong, it is a good thing that it exists.

In this example, the teacher asks the child if taking the snowflake troubled her mind (line 1.) and the child replies that it did a little bit (line 2.). Teacher H2 praises this answer by a child by emphasizing that a guilty conscience is a great thing in a human, because it tells you if you do something unpleasant, and after this the teacher also determines this feeling of a guilty conscience to be good as it tells what is wrong (line 3.). In this way, a guilty conscience is idealized as good—and affectively represented even as the guardian of good, as it can tell if you do something wrong. This implicitly contributed to an affective understanding of evil manifesting as the lack of a guilty conscience as a distinct opposite of good.

This separation from good that constructed evil indirectly was manifested when teachers utilized the discursive practice of questioning that contributed to a pressure-filled atmosphere when children reflected on their memories of wrongdoings in a manner that deviated from good. For example, a child who did not feel a guilty conscience or wanted to lie after a wrongdoing was questioned by the teachers, and guided by this affective and pressuring means to correct their reflections to illuminate good. In this way, by the ideal of indirect education on evil, the lack of a guilty conscience, and a will to lie after wrongdoing, were implicitly referring to evil as opposite of good. The discursive practice of questioning that affectively pointed out implicitly what could be evil and aimed to pressure and guide reflections back

to illuminate good is presented by the next example, as the teachers question a child when he doesn't feel bad after stealing a Lego figure from the previous kindergarten:

1. H1: Did it leave you little bit bad (feeling)
2. Child: No
3. H2: No, it didn't aah.
4. H1: Not at all?
5. H2: What about now when you think about it as a preschooler then?
6. Child: No
7. H2: (speech overlaps with child's line) did the act feel right or wrong to you?
8. H1: Could you still do so?
9. Child: No, I couldn't
10. H1 and H2: (overlapping speech) Yeeess
11. H1: You have learned after all.

In this example, teacher H1 first asks the child, who has just said that he stole a Lego figure from his previous kindergarten, if this act left the child feeling a little bit bad. The child answers "no" (line 2.) and teacher H2 states in a worried tone of voice that: "no it didn't aah" (line 3.). Right after this, teacher H1 questions the child's answer by stating, "not at all?" (line 4.) and by this, starts to point out that the child has deviated from the good embodiment of wrongdoing. Teacher H2 also contributes to this underlining of a deviation as she starts to pressure and guide the child back to the right kind of reflection by asking, "What about now when you think as a preschooler then?" (line 5.) and by this, offers the child the opportunity to correct his reflection from the present point of view. However, the child still answers "no" (line 6.), and so the teacher continues the effort to pressure and guide the child back to the good expression of wrongdoing by questioning, "did the act feel right or wrong to you?" (line 7.). In this instance, teacher H1 joins in to support the effort of H2 and asks a question of the child: "Could you still do so?" (line 8.). The child answers, "no I couldn't" (line 9.) and the teachers sound relieved as they say at the same time approvingly, "Yeeess" (line 10.), and teacher H1 continues this praising by saying, "you have learned after all" (line 11.). In this way, the ideal of the distinction between good and evil was manifested by the teachers as they questioned a child who deviated from the good and guided by pressuring the child back by affective measures to goodness without directly stating that a child's emotional embodiment was incorrect. By this deviance from good, the child also momentarily referred by his actions to what may be understood as out-group evil (not guilt) as opposite to good (guilt) that the in-group represents. The process of villainification can be set in motion as individuals are imagined as exceptional and separate from their social context (van Kessel, 2022). In this way, as in-group wrongdoing required guilt from the subject, the lack of guilt could be interpreted as pointing to the direction of a villainous evil character who was breaking the ideal of what it means to be an evil subject in the manner that the in-group required. What follows is that the process of villainification could also be detected during educational sessions while the teachers promoted their ideals.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the educational ideals about evil that teachers constructed during the interviews and how these ideals were communicated and further constructed in relation to emotions during educational sessions. According to our findings during the interviews and educational sessions, the teachers constructed educational ideals concerning evil and related emotions. Additionally, in the context of the educational sessions, the teachers communicated these ideals to children by utilizing affective technologies that were manifested as discursive practices of narrating, appealing, praising, and questioning. Overall, the ideals and affective technologies contributed to both anti-villainification processes by formulating an in-group-related sense of evil, and to the villainification processes by constructing a sense of out-group evil (cf. van Kessel, 2022).

Previously, affective technologies that take part in the formulation of evil in education have been explored only in relation to villainification processes (Zembylas, 2021). Our findings add to this and show that affective technologies can be utilized to contribute to both villainification and anti-villainification processes in education. In our study, the utilization of the anti-villainification process was evident as the teachers used affective technologies to promote the inclusion of the sense of evil in everyone's understanding of self, and the subjectivity of in-group members of the community, rather than projecting evil solely onto out-groups and cartoonish evildoers (cf. van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). However, these anti-villainification processes that the children and the teachers engaged in focused solely on individuals' capability to commit evil and be responsible for evil. In this way, the illumination of the societal aspect of culpability, which previous studies concerning the anti-villainification process hold as crucial to understanding the complexities of evil (van Kessel, 2022), was almost entirely neglected. Hence, our findings illuminate that the anti-villainification processes the teachers involved the children in only partly contributed to a more complex understanding of evil by focusing on evil within individual subjects, rather than the interconnectedness of societal and individual factors when it comes to evil.

Also, according to our findings, a trace of the villainification process was manifested by the construction and communication of ideals that created good and evil and in-group and out-group boundaries. This finding adds to the previous understanding of how evil can be formulated by the creation of in-group and out-group boundaries in education, through discourses and related emotions and affects (Zembylas, 2021). Additionally, as villainification has been explored previously only in relation to the education of older students (e.g., van Kessel, 2017), our findings add to this previous knowledge and illuminate how this process can be utilized in the education of young children. Also, the overall findings contribute to the still almost nonexistent empirical research on evil and the education of young children (e.g., Kurenlahti et al., 2025).

According to our findings, through the communication and construction of the ideal of indirect education on evil, the word "evil" was prohibited by the teachers when talking to children. Instead, they used other concepts that were less emotionally provocative. The norm here communicated and constructed for proper behavior and emotional expression (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2016) was to approach uncomfortable conversations about evil in a less judgmental and less threatening way with children. In this sense, the ideal of indirect education on evil can be interpreted as being constructed according to the understanding that children are different from adults and are still developmentally unable to deal directly with the topic of evil. This distinction separated children from adults as ontologically different and incapable beings when it comes to dealing with evil. This kind of separation is also highlighted by previous, theoretical studies that showed how children are often defined as developmentally lesser than adults when it comes to evil (Murriss, 2016). Also, even though the teachers in our study believed that the phenomenon of evil should be addressed with children, the ideal that forbade the direct usage of the concept contributed to the current Western tendency to avoid the topic of evil in education (Hunter, 2000; van Kessel, 2019). In this way, evil was implicitly constructed during the educational sessions. Our findings contribute to previous understanding of how evil is implicitly constructed in current Western education (Kurenlahti et al., 2025). As our previous study shows how evil is constructed implicitly through early childhood and pre-primary education curricula (Kurenlahti et al., 2025), this study goes beyond that and illuminates how evil is formulated and communicated in the real-life education of young children.

During the educational session, by the affective technologies not just implicit sense of evil, but also the related understanding of emotions and guilty conscience was promoted in the child group, resulting in in-group and out-group boundaries. This finding provides new information about the ways in which the affective technologies are currently utilized in education to guide culturally bound expressions of fundamental, self-defining emotions, such as guilt in the child group. According to Brinkmann (2018), guilt as a foundational emotion is evaluated by its correctness in varied situations, and it is fundamental to the construction of subjectivity and to the sense of who we and others are. In this case, both the lack and expression of guilt after wrongdoing could be interpreted to take part in the construction of children's subjectivity in the in-group and the out-group, and the good and evil boundaries. During the educational

session, sharing memories, reflecting on wrongdoing, and following guilt were employed to promote a specific kind of in-group evil subjectivity. The deviations from this normatively determined subjectivity illuminated the villainification process, where the out-group evil was constructed, especially as a lack of guilt in a child after wrongdoing. In this way, the lack of guilt also illuminated who the child could be if this emotion were nonexistent.

Overall, our study contributes to the current understanding of how evil in a child can be encountered in education (Jenks, 2005; Murriss, 2016). Previous theoretical studies concerning the historical and cultural trajectories of understanding children and evil have suggested that in Western culture, children who are perceived as evil are often understood as needing strict guidance and punishments (Jenks, 2005; Murriss, 2016). Our findings contribute to this view and show that, based on empirical data, that instead of solely adopting external and strict child rearing methods, teachers can use affective technologies to internalize the guilt in children in a way that could be interpreted to foster children's own internal guidance and emotional "punishments" after wrongdoing. In this way, not just external but also internal guidance were fostered and expected from children who were considered as potentially being evil or doing evil. Additionally, teachers employed external guidance to redirect children toward appropriate behavior when they failed to exhibit guilt after wrongdoing, thereby implicitly positioning them as representations of out-group evil. In this way, the potential evil associated with out-groups was swiftly countered with the external guidance of a child. With these findings, our study contributes to the previous understanding of how the "evil child" is encountered in education by illuminating internal and external aspects of guidance that aim to keep evil at bay when educating young children.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how educational ideals about evil and emotions are communicated to children by the teachers of pre-primary education. Overall, our study highlights the current state of so-called Western education that often does not address evil directly but instead deals with it indirectly, leaving children without an understanding of this topic of education. Our findings indicate that this avoidance can contribute to the process of formulating out-group members as evil in an indirect manner, by implicitly separating someone or something from the in-group, and what is believed to be good within educational settings.

We suggest that to prevent villainification and polarization efficiently, policies and practices that promote more direct engagement with the concepts of evil and with both individual and societal culpability are needed in the education of young children. To foster anti-villainification and a deeper understanding of the societal aspects of evil, it is necessary to move away from the current emphasis on individual development and learning in pre-primary education, which the Finnish curriculum also promotes (Havu-Nuutinen & Niikko, 2014). More broadly, the view of the child as being incapable and developmentally inferior to adults should be challenged by respecting children's capacity to discuss and reflect on difficult and emotionally charged topics—such as evil—from the perspective of both individual and societal culpability. In this way, evil can be understood as a complex phenomenon from the start, and children can become more aware of the villainification and anti-villainification processes in which they are involved through education. This awareness, in turn, enables them to reflect more profoundly on evil and its related emotions from their own perspectives and lived experiences.

Our study also illuminates that strict normative boundaries around reflections and the expression of emotions like guilt can set in motion the villainification process during an educational session. Based on this, we suggest that when evil and fundamental emotions, such as guilt, are reflected in education, more open spaces for these discussions are needed to prevent expectations of certain emotional expressions and actions in strictly normative ways. This could potentially prevent the formation of divisive in-group and out-group boundaries and, as a result, hinder the villainification process, also in a child group.

Since this study was conducted by focusing on a singular case, further explorations of the construction of evil and emotions are needed in the future to gain a broader understanding. While our

approach to conducting research offers information that is limited to specific contexts and data sources, it can still provide new insights into the under-researched topic of the construction of evil in real-life contexts, thus offering background knowledge for future research conducted with more extensive datasets. With this notion, we suggest that the construction of evil and related emotions should be scrutinized in the future in more diverse contexts of education and with participants from a range of backgrounds to grasp a more diverse comprehension of the phenomena.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

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Ethics approval and consent to participate: Prior to conducting the interviews, we sought informed consent from teachers, children, and their guardians for participation. In accordance with the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice set by the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Integrity, this meant that we did not need to seek a formal approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Helsinki to conduct our study. Instead, the research permit and the ethical approval of the study was granted by the Education Division, City of Helsinki by the numbers HEL 2021-000775 and HEL 2020-009695.

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The discursive constructions of evil and related emotions...

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