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Teaching under attack: The dilemmas, goals, and practices of upper-elementary school teachers when dealing with terrorism in class

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how 12 upper-elementary school teachers dealt with the occurrence of a terrorist attack in their city during school hours and in the immediate aftermath. All teachers were interviewed shortly after the terrorist attack about their goals, dilemmas, and pedagogical strategies employed in the classroom. We found that during the day of the attack the teachers tried to focus on providing both emotional support and adequate information to the pupils. While doing so, the teachers encountered four types of dilemmas: their perceived lack of knowledge concerning the attack and terrorism in general, their worry about increasing fear among pupils by discussing terrorism, the conundrum of balancing the different (and contrasting) perspectives of the pupils, and the lack of clear management support or guidelines issued. The findings are discussed through the lens of a pedagogy for political trauma, and a case is made for expanding this pedagogy with a historicizing approach. Such an approach may provide teachers with a (depoliticized) framework of reference that enables them to help pupils understand and reflect on the upsetting and contested topic of terrorism.

Terrorist attacks and the classroom

On Monday, March 18, 2019, T. Gökmen, a 37-year-old Turkish migrant with jihadist sympathies, opened fire on passengers in a tram nearby the 24 Octoberplein in Utrecht, the Netherlands. News about the shooting soon spread all over social media. Since it was initially unclear whether it was a shooting or a terrorist attack, the municipality of Utrecht took far-reaching measures. The inner city was placed under a lockdown, and children and adults were no longer allowed to enter or leave schools and university buildings. As it turned out, the gunman killed four people and injured six. A year later, in March 2020, T. Gökmen was sentenced to life imprisonment for plotting an attack with a jihadist terrorist motive.

It is well known that terrorist attacks have pronounced effects on pupils, especially those living in close proximity to an attack site, in both the physical and the virtual sense (Pfefferbaum et al., 2003). Young people outside New York who tuned into terrorist reporting in the media after the September 11, 2001 attacks (hereafter, 9/11) displayed similar symptoms of stress and anxiety to those living in the city (Apple, 2002; Hoven et al., 2005). The attack in Utrecht occurred on a weekday morning, and most school-age children were in class as the news broke and the lockdown was implemented. Teachers were thus placed in the front line of

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disseminating information to their pupils and helping them to cope with the attack (Felix et al., 2010). During such a terrorist attack, teachers have to deal with fear, trauma, and death, and they have to do so in a sensitive pedagogical manner (Sheppard & Levy, 2019; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021; Tatar & Amram, 2007). On the one hand, terrorist attacks with jihadist motives may give rise to expressions of Islamophobia in class, prompting teachers to deal with anti-Islam rhetoric among their pupils (Mancosu & Ferrín Pereira, 2021). On the other hand, teachers in the Netherlands could also face a small subgroup of Muslim pupils who express sentiments of support for the motives of jihadist perpetrators (Wansink et al., 2019; Zhirkov et al., 2014).

After a terrorist attack, creating a safe environment and discussing terrorism can be emotional and challenging for teachers and pupils alike (Pinar Alakoc, 2019). When a terrorist attack happens near a school and the school is placed under a lockdown, teachers can neither prepare nor circumvent the issue at hand and have to react spontaneously. Little is known about how teachers deal with pupils' reactions during such disruptive events. Yet, since teachers are increasingly confronted with extremism, even in stable democracies, more research on how to address political violence and extremism in the classroom is required. Recent examples, such as the 2021 U.S. Capitol riots in the United States, the jihadist-inspired murder of teacher Samuel Paty in France in 2020, or right wing extremist attacks in New Zealand in 2019 support this point.

The situation in Utrecht, and our engagement at multiple elementary schools in Utrecht, propelled us into the unique situation of being able to monitor and investigate patterns of teachers' first-hand responses following terrorist attacks. We interviewed 12 elementary school teachers within five weeks of the March 2019 attack in Utrecht. The teachers worked at different schools dispersed throughout the city of Utrecht and in the surrounding areas. It was our aim to explore how elementary teachers discussed the terrorist attack with their pupils, what their goals were, and what types of dilemmas they experienced during and after the days of the attack.

Literature review

The impact of terrorism on children

Terrorism is interpreted as a "contested concept" in academic literature, namely as a discursive frame and a political attribution—often not properly and judicially delineated —with the power to transform conflicting political, ideological, or religious positions into repertoires of action and governmental practices. Terrorism comprises various layers of analysis and description (it is an event, a historical trend, a policy, and a dispositive) and is a moving target, both discursively and legally. This insight is underscored by the fact that more than 200 academic, governmental, and intergovernmental definitions have been in use since 9/11 (Crenshaw, 2000; Jackson, 2016; Pisoiu & Hain, 2018).

Since this study needs a point of departure, we decided to work with the broadly shared and common definition of terrorism as politically, ideologically, or religiously motivated violence perpetrated by individuals, groups, or state-sponsored agents and intended to instill feelings of terror and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision-making and change behavior (de Graaf & van den Bos, 2020; van den Bos & de Graaf, 2020). From this definition, it follows that violence and the threat of violence are central to terrorism, as well as the fact that terrorism not only targets specific victims but also always

has the "theater of fear" in mind and aims to mobilize a broader audience to follow its lead or be intimidated by it (de Graaf, 2011).

Several studies have shown that terrorism affects psychological well-being and social relations within the population in general and within populations living geographically close to the attack in particular (Huddy et al., 2003). Research has also shown that school-age children are likely to be more severely affected by disasters than adults (Pfefferbaum et al., 2003). Lack of life experience and cognitive abilities make them less able to handle the fear caused by terrorism, which may result in a loss of perceived safety and perceived social support.

The reactions of children and adolescents to a terrorist attack do, however, vary and fluctuate according to time and place. They may span a wide range of emotions, such as fear, sadness, and anger (Otto et al., 2007). Tatar and Amram (2007), who investigated the reactions of adolescents following a terrorist attack in Israel, described their reactions as including—in descending order—fear, stress, anger, a wish to take revenge, attempts to receive more information, sadness, and indifference. Research after 9/11 found that pupils' worries about issues concerning their personal safety and the future of the country increased after the attacks and that they displayed more anxiety-related symptoms, such as difficulty concentrating on their work and activities (Noppe et al., 2006). In short, terrorism affects pupils both in countries where terrorism is virulent and where it takes place incidentally.

The impact of the news media

The impact of terrorism on society in our present day and level of engagement is substantially enhanced by the widespread media coverage of attacks in our current 24/7 infotainment society (Barnett & Reynolds, 2009; Gereluk, 2012). Many children are exposed to high-intensity media coverage after a terrorist event. In the week following the 9/11 attacks, children and youths aged 5–18 watched three hours of terror-related television news on average (Duarte et al., 2011). Children were incessantly searching for information about the terrorist attacks—through television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. The troublesome aspect here is that school-age children are vulnerable, as they often have limited resources for coping with abundant information. Children are less able to process, sort, and understand the context of a terrorist attack. Unfettered media intake may increase their confusion and ensuing fear (Comer et al., 2008).

Recent research investigating how pupils reacted to the mass killings in Norway on July 22, 2011 showed that the media and peers appeared to be their major source of information rather than parents or teachers (Jørgensen et al., 2015). It transpired that pupils constructed narratives containing all kinds of fictions and misunderstanding to make sense of the attacks. Yet, these narratives could not provide them with a sense of safety and instead increased their feelings of uncertainty. In short, pupils enter the classroom after terrorist attacks not as blank pages but filled with narratives of their own making, misconstrued ideas, and fictions. Against this backdrop, teachers need to find ways to enable a discussion on terrorism while both giving space to conflicting emotions and providing a knowledge-based and normative framework to help pupils make sense of terrible events.

The polarizing effect of terrorism

Pinar Alakoc (2019) noted that terrorism is not only a unique topic because of the high-intensity media coverage but also because of the highly polarized nature of the public

discourse surrounding this phenomenon. The dominant political rhetoric in many countries often tends to associate terrorism with a particular region, ethnic group, and/or a specific religious creed, projecting responsibility or even blame for single acts of terrorism on those groups as a whole, which exacerbates existing tensions. In the Netherlands, the debate on the nexus between Islam and violence is one of the most heated ones in society and politics and heavily infused with prejudices and bigotry (de Veen & Thomas, 2020). In the United States, subsequent demonization of Muslims started after 9/11 (Darragh & Petrie, 2019; Eraqi, 2015; Journell, 2018; Stoddard et al., 2019), and this demonization did not stop at the school gates. Ben-Porath (2006) noted how threats to national security reshaped the school as a vulnerable site where narrow and one-dimensional national narratives about citizenship and statehood could lead to the exclusion of minorities.

This phenomenon can be explained, in part, by applying terror management theory. This theory proposes that mortality concerns, for example, caused by terrorist threats, may lead people to reject cultures other than their own and display stronger inclinations to "rally around the flag" (Greenberg et al., 1986). According to van Kessel et al. (2020), enabling pupils and teachers to understand the psychological origins of their resistance to other worldviews might help them to overcome aversion in order to learn from them. However, in times of crisis, when teachers have to respond to terrorist or extremist attacks taking place in their country, such a reflective stance is hard to come by. Finding a space to discuss terrorism in an open and reflective way is and will remain a major challenge, especially if the terrorist event at hand causes such polarized discussions and gives rise to controversial reactions.

Discussing terrorism as a "settled" or as an "open" question

In agreement with D. E. Hess and McAvoy (2015), we contend that there is a distinction between *open* issues and *settled ones*, with "settled" indicating that a common opinion in society has emerged that has delineated and defined the question in specific terms (see also, Journell, 2017). This distinction has a direct bearing on how such topics are discussed in the classroom. Terrorism as such is, on the one hand, a "settled" issue in the Netherlands, as there is broad agreement in society that terrorism is beyond the pale and should be condemned. When news of the shooting in Utrecht on March 18, 2019 transpired, the attack was condemned throughout society, the Muslim community included. Yet, on the other hand, terrorism oftentimes sparks controversies with regard to the correct response to it. For example, a more recent terrorist attack in France sparked debate on the legitimacy of blasphemy that reverberated through the whole of Europe. On October 16, 2020, 47-year-old history teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by a young jihadist terrorist in a Parisian suburb. The motive for killing Paty, established by the French authorities, was the fact that he had discussed and displayed Charlie Hebdo's 2012 cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in class, which was perceived by the perpetrator as a directed insult, warranting the death of the teacher. Since many Muslim pupils expressed some sort of understanding for the perpetrator's rage over Paty's alleged act of blasphemy (if not for the actual killing), this particular terrorist attack became an "open" and contested issue. Throughout France, and also in the Netherlands, heated debates on the alleged liability of blasphemy took place both inside and outside the classroom. In such a situation, teachers should be able to help pupils to engage thoughtfully and respectfully with conflicting ethical perspectives and

religious convictions (Kunzman, 2006). Yet at the same time, teachers were confronted with pupils expressing extreme ideas or issuing theological statements that openly clashed with the aims and practices of democracy (James, 2010; Wansink et al., 2019). Operating in such a volatile situation requires far more effort and creativity.

In sum, "settled" issues can become "open" again, triggered by new political or demographic developments (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; D. E. Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017). For teachers, it is not always clear from the beginning whether a particular attack will "behave" itself as a "settled" or an "open" question. Sometimes teachers, therefore, try to ignore the topic of terrorist attacks altogether given the fact that pupils' reactions may be so unpredictable (Brody & Baum, 2007). When teachers are confronted, however, with a terrorist attack in their own city, such as in Utrecht, avoidance is difficult. Pupils, moreover, expect their teachers to help them navigate such contested issues properly and safely.

Theoretical framework

van Overmeire et al. (2020) investigated the experiences of minors who were indirectly exposed to terrorist attacks based on data gained through a youth helpline. They found that children expressed a twofold need when confronted with attacks: they were in need of a space to express and handle their emotional reactions, and they articulated a demand for information and an explanation about the shocking events that took place. According to Felix et al. (2010), teachers are an important resource in stimulating socio-emotional recovery after a terrorist attack, as they often play a central role in the lives of children. Therefore, the school environment should be considered an important support system for children coping with tragedy and trauma.

There is abundant literature on the role of emotions when discussing sensitive topics relating to trauma (e.g., D. E. Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Zembylas, 2007). Sheppard and Levy (2019) noted that in a political climate that is increasingly polarized, inviting pupils to share their beliefs may incite difficult emotions—anger, resistance, and suffering—which requires specific skills. Yet, most research shows that teachers tend to feel uncomfortable when handling sensitive topics, especially those related with trauma, grief, and death (e.g., D. E. Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021). Stylianou and Zembylas (2021), for example, listed a variety of reasons for teachers' avoidance of addressing trauma: lack of confidence in their own skills, fear of negative reactions from parents, or lack of professional support.

While there are many situations and experiences that may trigger trauma-related emotions (such as grief over relatives' deaths, illness, COVID-19 lockdown measures), in this article we expound on a very specific type of traumatic event: terrorist attacks. Quite typical of these kinds of traumatic events is their political and politicized nature. We, therefore, want to build further on Sondel et al.'s (2018) *pedagogy for political trauma*. Sondel et al. developed their approach based on teachers' responses to the distress caused among pupils by Donald Trump's election in 2016. Their pedagogy "serves the democratic and emancipatory purposes of education while simultaneously alleviating and/or mediating trauma caused by events in the political sphere" (p. 179). The framework consists of three supportive strategies: tending to pupils' socio-emotional well-being, cultivating and developing positive civic dispositions, and teaching to develop critical consciousness by analyzing social inequality.

We hypothesize that this framework is also applicable to terrorism-related situations. First, after a terrorist attack, teachers need to create and maintain a safe classroom climate in order

to deal with potential situations of strong emotions or even latent aggression among pupil groups. Second, because terrorism can manifest itself as a contested topic, developing civic dispositions—finding ways and means to enhance positive attitudes toward democracy and civic values—is important to make pupils resilient aware of polarization. Third, jihadist terrorist attacks can be particularly harmful for Muslim pupils who strive for acceptance in Western democratic societies. Teachers in the Netherlands and in other Western countries have stressed that the exposure of children to jihadist attacks fuels discrimination against Muslims (i.e., guilt by association) and may prompt stereotyped thinking (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001; Welch, 2016; Zaal, 2012). Teaching and training pupils' critical consciousness should be facilitated by creating curricular opportunities in advance of such disruptive moments. In such non-threatening times, pupils can be prepared and taught to discuss events in society that may frame them—as representatives of specific ethnic and religious groups—against each other (Abu El-Haj, 2007).

Finally, as described by van Overmeire et al. (2020), pupils are entitled to the provision of suitable and adequate information to help them make sense of disruptive events. We, therefore, propose a fourth strategy to Sondel et al.'s (2018) framework of pedagogy for political trauma: providing adequate informational support. Teachers should be prepared to present an informed framework to students to contextualize and make sense of the traumatic event at hand, in this case a terrorist attack (Awan et al., 2019; Journell, 2018; Pinar Alakoc, 2019; Quartermaine, 2016). Yet, even though this fourth strategy may seem a truism, in the Netherlands, terrorism is rarely mentioned in the state curriculum or in textbooks at all, which means that, in general, most pupils and teachers will have little to no prior knowledge about terrorism. Studies in the United States have equally found that terrorism is rarely addressed in the formal curriculum of K–12 schooling and that it is seldomly presented in a nuanced way that educates pupils about terrorism beyond merely pointing to Islamist extremism (Bellows, 2016; Journell, 2018; Kuthe, 2011; Stoddard & Hess, 2016). Moreover, although elementary preservice social studies teachers in the United States feel a responsibility to teach about terrorism (i.e., 9/11), they often feel uncertain about how to teach it (Bellows, 2016). And a recent national survey among secondary teachers in the United States showed that teachers wanted to engage their pupils more in depth in terrorism and 9/11 but it also found that state standards and time constraints inhibited this desire substantially (Stoddard et al., 2019).

In short, in situations of terrorist attacks, it is of paramount importance that schools can fall back on the above-mentioned "pedagogy for political trauma" framework, including a clear ethos, structure, and educational knowledge to help teachers discuss terrorism in class. Yet, before we can start to work on creating such a framework, it is of importance to know how teachers actually deal with terrorist attacks during school hours and in the following days. Since this knowledge has not yet been established, our research aims to provide a basis to start developing the aforementioned framework.

Research questions

This article attempts to shed more light on teachers' experiences in dealing with terrorism in the classroom. We specifically focus on terrorism in order to prepare recommendations for future interventions, programs, and further research, in line with the framework described above. Therefore, our research questions are as follows:

(1) According to elementary school teachers, what were their goals in discussing terrorism with pupils during and shortly after a terrorist attack?
(2) What types of dilemmas did elementary school teachers experience when discussing terrorism with pupils during and shortly after a terrorist attack?
(3) What pedagogical practices did the elementary school teachers describe in relation to these discussions?

Methods

Participants

The teachers were purposefully selected for this study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) and had to meet two criteria to be included. First, the elementary school where they worked had to be situated near the place of attack in Utrecht. Second, only teachers who actually had been teaching during the day or during the days after the attack were invited to participate. We also preferred teachers who taught children in the age range of 10 to 12. To find our potential participants, we used a network of elementary schools that is connected with the teacher educational institute of Utrecht University. Potential participants received a recruitment e-mail describing the aim and procedure of the study and instructions on how they could volunteer to participate.

Eventually 12 teachers, 8 female and 4 male, responded and participated in this study (see Table 1). Ten participants were teaching during the attack. Peter and Emma taught only on the days after the attack. Coco taught younger pupils during the attack. The teachers were aged between 25 and 60 years old and had between 2 and 38 years of work experience. All teachers were White, non-religious, and born in the Netherlands.

We aimed to select diverse schools in terms of population. At school B, the pupils predominantly came from a migration background, mostly from a non-Western country (i.e., mostly Turkey or Morocco). At three schools (i.e., C, E, F) the population was multicultural in composition, whereas at two other schools (A, D), the pupil community was primarily White with no migration background. The school where most pupils had a family history of migration provided special needs education connected to language deficiencies and developmental issues. This school was located in a low-income neighborhood with many inhabitants having a history of migration. This school was also the one where teachers reported pupils expressing sympathy for the motives of Islamic terrorism.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Work experience (years)	Type school	School
1. Kim	Female	26	5	Primarily non-migration background	A
2. Mike	Male	60	17	Primarily migration background	B
3. Valery	Female	38	17	Primarily non-migration background	A
4. Jeff	Male	46	4	Primarily migration background	B
5. Emma	Female	42	12	Primarily non-migration background	A
6. Sophia	Female	59	38	Primarily migration background	B
7. Jacky	Female	32	8	Primarily migration background	B
8. Isabella	Female	25	2	Multicultural background	C
9. Peter	Male	59	2	Primarily non migration background	D
10. Jakob	Male	43	21	Multicultural background	E
11. Coco	Female	30	7	Primarily migration background	B
12. Mia	Female	36	12	Multicultural background	F

Design procedure, instruments, and data collection

Given the exploratory character of this study, we used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to elicit participants' information, as this approach is broad-ranging (Cohen et al., 2007). All teachers gave their active consent to anonymized use of their interview data. The interviews were conducted in an enclosed space by the researcher so that they were not subject to disturbances. The interviews took approximately one hour. We asked open questions, such as: "What do you think the term terrorism means?" and "Did you discuss the recent attack in Utrecht in your class?" The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix. During the interviews, the teacher's comments were the guiding factor; if the teacher made an interesting comment, the researcher could deviate from the interview template and ask them to expand on that comment. As such, detailed and relevant information was elicited with regard to the research questions. If a consensus on the definition of terrorism remained elusive, the researcher suggested an academic definition, allowing the participant to link their answers to this delineation of the topic. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to enable analysis. The transcription was emailed to the participant so that they could check it and potentially modify their responses.

Analysis

To answer the first research question, relevant units of meaning were identified (Boeije, 2010), indicating text fragments where teachers described the purpose (goals) they had in mind when addressing terrorism in the classroom. In the first phase of open coding, all the stated goals were coded. In the axial phase of coding, the needs of pupils were used, as described by van Overmeire et al. (2020), as sensitizing concepts for categorizing the various purposes brought up by the teachers. Eventually, the goals were divided into two overarching categories that matched the findings from the literature: goals related to providing emotional support and goals related to the provision of information and sense-making. We also found an additional category supported, which was avoiding radicalization.

To answer the second research question, the text fragments in which a teacher described a dilemma or question were identified, taking our cues from both the start of the interview and from later sequences (Morrow, 2005). Some of the teachers' statements were contradictory. A teacher may start by saying that they would like their pupils to explore different perspectives but would later reflect that they sometimes also try to restrict specific perspectives. The researchers felt that the teacher was indicating a dilemma. The researchers would then assess the whole interview again in order to find the implicitly present dilemma. In one case, for example, the teacher's aim was to apply the method of multiperspectivity, but at the same time she felt that violent or aggressive arguments should be curtailed in order to preserve respect and dignity in class. The four main dilemmas that kept resurfacing in the interview transcripts are presented below. The interrater reliability of the two main goals and the four dilemmas were checked. The second author was trained to use the codebook to identify the teachers' goals, as well as their dilemmas, and to code all interviews, resulting in a satisfactory unweighted Kappa of 0.868. To answer the last research question—about pedagogical practices applied in class—we segmented the utterances in which teachers commented upon their chosen pedagogical strategies and methods and how they explained to us their arguments in using these pedagogical instruments.

A note is needed on positionality. The authors are part of a university-based project called TerInfo. This project has been created to help teachers discuss terrorism and political violence in the classroom. TerInfo provides a historical context and pedagogical tools to give a context for instances of political violence, radicalization, terrorism, or other political disruptive moments with the aim of enhancing pupils' awareness and resilience against extremism in a democratic manner. As researchers partly linked to this project, we adopt a pragmatic epistemological position. Reality is never to be known directly, as reality is mediated through selective interpretation (based on our Western European positionality) and language (Putnam, 1981). Yet, attacks do occur, and violent extremism may cause disruptive moments in the classroom. In this situation, we develop and produce knowledge that directly creates a framework for interpretation. For that, we are fully accountable, and this article is part of our attempt to substantiate and ground our praxis in theory and research.

Findings

Teacher goals

Based on the work of van Overmeire et al. (2020), we were able to identify and distinguish two major categories of stated teacher goals during and after the day of the attack. The first goal pertained to the provision of emotional support, and the second goal entailed the teacher's purpose in wanting to make sense of the whole situation by providing the pupils with sound information. The different goals are explained below, with a brief remark about an additional category of goals that was only raised by two teachers.

Providing emotional support

The first goal we identified pertained to the provision of emotional support for pupils in distress. Ten participants described goals related to this first category, as they aimed to reestablish a psychological state of security among their pupils after the initial shock of the attack. Most teachers described a situation in which the pupils were nervous and excited, although these emotions differed according to each pupil. None of the teachers were confronted with a situation of total chaos, loss of control, or moral panic, although many reported feelings of insecurity in estimating how to handle the situation. Mia explained how, after the March 18 attacks, the overall situation at school was frightening for the pupils since they were put under a complete lockdown and did not know at first how many perpetrators were involved in the attack or where they were heading (one perpetrator was only caught after being hunted for many hours, with the city brought to an eerie standstill).

Mike's school was situated in the vicinity close to the site of the attack: "We, the pupils heard sirens going on all day long. If the children saw it [i.e., the attack], I do think that you should discuss it in order to at least remove the immediate anxiety from children." Indeed, all teachers who worked in schools near the location of the attack described how pupils felt a personal connection to the attack, both direct and indirect. Isabella, for example, said that a sister of one of her pupils was in the tram that was attacked. She said that during the day of the attack her main goal was just to keep the pupils calm. She tried to reassure the pupils that the city of Utrecht at that specific moment was probably the safest space on earth,

referring to all the police who were actively deployed and searching for the perpetrator at that time. Sophia explained during her interview that when the media reported the name of the perpetrator, some of her pupils said they knew him because they lived in same the neighborhood. Sophia tried to keep the pupils calm by phrasing the incident not as terrorism but as something else.

As expected, we found that discussing the attack in class became virtually unavoidable for teachers. Valery said she observed that several pupils were shocked and insecure during the day: "Then I thought: well, I have to discuss it. Because then I can also mention that they should not be afraid of everything." Jacky also reflected on the feasibility of her goals and said: "to decrease possible anxiety in children . . . Well, ideally try to remove all the fear, but that is of course not possible, but at least do something with that fear because it is there in the children." Mike explained that he tried to take away the pupils' fear but that he also tried to empower the pupils by stating that they can actively contribute to fighting terrorism by speaking out. He said: "I discuss terrorism in any case to take away the children's fears, and I try to impart the message that things can be done differently; you are free to choose, you are allowed to say: 'I don't agree with this.'" Finally, several teachers reported that in the days after the attack, they were still focused on the well-being of the pupils. Jeff explained that every morning when school started, his goal was to find out whether all his pupils were there, whether they had slept well, and if they were emotionally stable.

Providing information

The second category of goals we identified pertain to the provision of information and, in particular, to the attempt "to make sense of it all". Eleven teachers mentioned goals related to this category and stated that they aimed to provide a context and meaning for the shooting. In order to create this context, the teachers tried to provide accurate information about the specific attack and about terrorism in general. We found that days after the attack, when the emotions of the pupils had calmed down somewhat, the teachers started to focus more on aspects of sense-making and contextualization. Jacky said that for her, it was important to explain to the pupils why these types of attacks happened at all and what she could tell them about previous incidents, such as previous terrorist attacks in France. Similarly, Kim explained that she aimed to teach about terrorism in such a way that the pupils were prepared and could give context and meaning to an attack that occurred in their own city. Jacky told us that her pupils did not really understand terrorism, conceptually speaking. She worked in a school in the middle of a high-crime neighborhood, and many of her pupils considered all crime to be terrorism. Jeff mentioned that his ambition was to point out to his pupils the dangers of generalization and to empower them to form their own opinions while stressing that not all Muslims are terrorists, and that all sorts of people with extreme ideas and convictions (i.e., religion, political affiliation, etc.) can become terrorists. As Jeff noted, "During such a class, I teach pupils the difference between a fact and an opinion."

Several teachers made remarks in which they drew a relationship between decreasing fear among the pupils and making sense of the whole situation by embedding the incident in a more contextualized framework. The underlying idea here is that by providing information on previous incidents of terrorism, the pupils are able to put the whole event into a broader perspective, which functions as a coping mechanism to understand the disruptive situation. Kim, for example, said: "I think the more knowledge the children have of it, the less anxious they might become." In line with this idea, Jacob held that "by providing

information and making children more familiar with the subject itself, you can achieve a second goal, which is to eventually get rid of some fear." Jacob explained that he felt a good way of trying to decrease fear in pupils was by giving them a historical framework by putting terrorism into a historical perspective, which taught them the important fact that terrorism is part of all times and places, that it comes and goes, and that our reaction as a society matters.

Avoiding radicalization

Jeff and Coco worked at a school where many pupils had a migrant background and came from Muslim families. They reported that their pupils were especially sensitive to terrorism as a topic and that they were even afraid of instances of radicalization among their pupils. Jeff explained during the interview that he did not want his pupils to come up with the "wrong ideas". He also mentioned that he was unsure about how to prevent pupils from being further engulfed in a process of radicalization. At the same time, he admitted that he found it almost impossible to know or to recognize which pupils were prone to radicalization. He struggled to decide how to talk to these children and how to make them reflect on their own ideas. He found it particularly difficult for children of elementary school age. At the end of the interview, he suggested that more cooperation between the school, the mosque, and youth workers would help to guide children at risk. Coco also worried about her pupils being open to radical ideas. She said: "I think they are a very vulnerable target group and could be persuaded to go along with such acts. It is therefore very important that we discuss it and show why terrorism is not good." None of the other teachers made reference to this very specific and complicated goal.

Types of dilemmas experienced in the classroom after and during the attack

Before discussing the four types of dilemma that the teachers experienced, we need to emphasize that the teachers felt very different about their self-efficacy in discussing terrorism in the classroom. Three teachers felt that they lacked competence, six teachers said they felt quite competent, and three teachers felt competent. Nine teachers said that they needed help or advice on how to discuss terrorism in the classroom. Only Peter had not experienced any dilemmas at all, but he was not teaching or at school on the day of the attack. All others experienced several types of dilemmas: being confronted with a lack of information and knowledge, the worry that through their teaching they would not mitigate but will increase fear among the pupils, the conundrum of either exploring or limiting different points of view and perspectives while discussing terrorism, and the lack of clear management support or guidelines.

A lack of information and knowledge

This dilemma refers to the perceived lack of information and prior knowledge of terrorism that made teachers uncertain about how to address the topic of terrorism properly. This uncertainty pertained to both concrete data on the attack itself and to teacher levels of background knowledge on terrorism in general.

Four teachers explicitly commented that there were so many stories bouncing through the media on the day of the March 18 attack that they struggled to give an accurate account to their class. It was for this reason that Jacky, for example, only divulged information

sparingly to her pupils in class. Isabella said, "Yes, it was frightening, the whole situation, because everybody had a story at some point. I think social media has developed to our disadvantage on this matter; unfiltered information circulates too quickly and too wildly. In fact, pupils knew about the attack sooner than I did." Kim mentioned the impact of social media as well. She said that children were receiving telephone calls or text messages from their parents all day. Kim, therefore, had to address the subject in class, but at the same time, she did not feel knowledgeable enough to teach the topic. For Jeff, it was important to stick with the "facts" that day: "Well, then you indeed see how important it is to stay with the facts because of all these rumors floating around in the news and on social media."

Apart from this lack of actual information on the day of the attack, eight teachers reported feelings of uncertainty and a lack of grounded knowledge on the subject of terrorism. Kim explained how she felt insecure about teaching the children about terrorism at all and that she hardly knew where to start. Mike also acknowledged his lack of confidence in teaching the topic: "It would be nice if one had a bit more knowledge about terrorism." Almost all teachers reported that they were only able to discuss and teach terrorism in a cursory way, which for them felt like a shortcoming.

Sharing information or increasing fear?

The second dilemma (reported by five teachers) is a challenging one; it pertains to the tension between providing information in class and increasing fear among the pupils by giving them this information. Teachers struggled to estimate which content was age-appropriate for pupils and which details would only instill more fear. Jacky felt confident enough to discuss terrorism in class but found it a challenging subject: "If I am honest, I was thinking all the time, which bit of information takes away fear, and which bit scares the children?" Valery also felt afraid of being too open and giving away too many unpleasant details about terrorism that would haunt children in their sleep. Kim summarized her dilemma succinctly: "What would be the limit for telling them? What should one share with the children, and what not? I don't know, and I don't feel competent enough to decide on my own." For Mike, it was clear from the beginning that he would not share all the details with his pupils since he perceived them as too young (he taught children aged 11–12 years). Isabelle, who also reported feelings of insecurity, made a plea for help: "I would really appreciate more knowledge about terrorism, about what it's useful to say and what not."

Expanding or constraining different perspectives on terrorism?

The third dilemma refers to the challenge of multiperspectivity. Seven teachers reported an inclination for multiperspectivity and stated that they tried to help their pupils explore different perspectives on the topic. At the same time, however, they felt they had to limit the pupils' moral bandwidth. These teachers wanted to provide their pupils with the opportunity to express their opinions and emotions, but on the other hand they also felt it their duty to restrict opinions that bordered on or overlapped with racism and the condoning of violence. Jacob emphasized that, for him, every pupil had the right to express their opinion but that he applied clear rules about how to do so. Isabella first contended that she aspired to have pupils expand and explore different perspectives without her intervening, but later in the interview, she did admit that she would put a stop to things if pupils got aggressive or used bullying language. Coco would also curtail pupil contributions if they became too

annoying or aggressive. "Well, this is enough", she would say, "we are not going to talk about that because I do not like this anymore."

Jacob's school was attended by children from different religious backgrounds, which made the discussion of religious-related terrorism contentious. Jacob said: "Some children may harbor very specific notions and ideas, which they derive from their parents. This makes the discussion unpredictable because one cannot know how they will respond." Mike and Sophia reported confrontations with pupils who, in their opinion, seemed to have sympathy for terrorists in a way. Sophia stated that in those cases, when she is tired and expects pupils to vent radical ideas, she would rather avoid the conversation altogether. She explicitly referred to her own struggles to avoid getting angry: "Sometimes I need to be really careful not to get angry with pupils over their comments and utterances." Sophia said that some of her pupils misused "Islam" to justify aggression against non-Muslims or against gay or lesbian people. She was aware that her pupils could be imbued with such radical ideas at home or on the street and felt challenged by them: "One tries to make them think differently, but it is such a difficult and tiresome process. If they learn these things at home, then I can hardly change them." Although Jeff normally tried to remain neutral in political or religious discussions, he would step in when pupils expressed antidemocratic or radical ideas. For Mia, it was exactly the pupils' vulnerability to radical ideas that worried her. As she said, "I think that these pupils are in a very vulnerable group and that they could even be targeted and persuaded to engage in acts of radicalism. That is exactly why we should not cease to discuss terrorism with them and explain to them why jihadism and terrorism are not acceptable." For Mia, it is a moral approach that is needed, as opposed to only sharing facts and figures: "At this point, I feel that I have to give them my opinion, although I do make it clear that this is my opinion and not a fact."

A lack of clear management support and guidelines

This dilemma refers to the extent to which the teachers felt supported by their management during the day. Here, the picture was again ambivalent. Three teachers felt supported, six teachers felt considerably supported, and three teachers said that they did not feel supported. Schools reacted in a variety of ways to the attack and the lockdown. Some school leaders forbade their teachers outright from divulging anything to the pupils at all, leading to frustration among the teachers. Valery reported being put in an impossible situation: "You're just waiting for instructions from the school leader. And eventually they tell you not to give the children any detail. One sticks to these instructions, yes, but it doesn't feel right since I was hiding something from my pupils." Valery said that the children in her class were very aware that something was going on and confronted her with all sorts of questions, but she was instructed not to tell them anything. Kim told us how, in her opinion, the school management did not give instructions at all, leading, according to Kim, to some teachers sharing every detail with their pupils, while others said nothing.

There was sometimes a gap between the teachers, as a team, and the school leadership. Some teachers reported solidarity among the teachers but abandonment by the school leader. Three teachers said that they had been in contact with researchers from Utrecht University and the TerInfo Project team and felt supported and secure about the subject matter through the materials they received. These teachers relied on each other and external contacts to find the information and materials needed to deal with the attack in class.

Pedagogical practices

The teachers employed a range of pedagogical practices after the terrorist attack. They all emphasized the importance of creating a safe classroom environment in which pupils can express their emotions, fears, and opinions. As Kim stated, "Making the children feel safe is the highest priority; if they don't feel safe, you have to invest in that first." Sophia and Jeff concurred with that sentiment while adding that conditional to such a safe environment is formulating and establishing clear rules for debate and interaction. Peter even went so far as keeping a tight leash on the children when they started laughing at each other in order to control the classroom environment. Jeff stressed the importance of respect and did not allow funny jokes. For Isabella, however, it was important that pupils had enough space to express their feelings in their own way and that humor could render the topic a little bit less sensitive. In Isabella's opinion, every pedagogical practice stands or falls on how the teacher behaves themselves: "I think that in such a discussion, there should be space for emotions and feelings. The teacher should lead by example on this." She also admitted that this did not solve the uncertainty for many teachers about what a "good example" was when talking about terrorism.

The second most reported practice was the work method of the "class-wide discussion". All teachers told us that they had used this discussion format, with students either seated in a circle or in their usual seating arrangement. During these discussions, the teachers tried to react in a responsive way, aiming to gauge their pupils' emotional states during the class conversation. Sophia explained how she first tried to determine whether any pupil had a direct link to the victims—something that would inevitably make discussing the attack highly emotionally charged. Jacky, on the other hand, tried to place herself in her pupils' shoes: "I try to empathize with my pupils. I imagine what sort of environment they come from and what they must have experienced." For Valery, it was essential to first ask the pupils whether they wanted to participate in a class-wide discussion at all: "Well, I know some kids are very scared. I know that. So first, I say to those children: do you like it when we talk about it, or would you rather not hear more about the attacks? In that case, you may leave the class and find something to do on your own. Yes, I leave that choice to them."

Finally, it is important to report that two teachers had several refugee children in their class and correspondingly were more careful about addressing the topic of terrorism. In their experience, these children could become scared and troubled by such discussions. One of Jacky's pupils was a refugee whose mother had been shot in the leg during a war in their home country. When news of the attack spread, this pupil went into a state of panic. With respect to pedagogical practices, it is clear that such children need special attention.

Conclusions and discussion

The above findings must all be interpreted in light of the fact that the interviews were carried out directly after the attack. All of the teachers stayed calm, prevented their classes from entering a state of panic, and did their utmost with what little knowledge they had at hand. Such behavior is in line with social scientific research on post-disaster comportment. It is indeed a myth that people react passively or with fear after a disaster. Social science studies have repeatedly demonstrated that people do not develop shock reactions and tend

to act in what they believe is the best interests of themselves and their co-citizens, given their limited understanding of the situation, and they often show high degrees of prosocial behavior (Baker & Deham, 2019; Perry & Lindell, 2003). Our participants were no exception.

The teachers who were interviewed tried to respond constructively by first helping the pupils to cope with their emotions. In this situation, creating a safe and calm classroom environment while carefully monitoring the reactions of the pupils was a first important step and shows that the teachers intuitively tried to meet the emotional needs of pupils as described by van Overmeire et al. (2020).

Second, we found that all teachers aimed to provide their pupils with accurate information and help them to make sense of what happened. This finding aligns with research describing that when something unexpected and potentially frightening happens, narrative structuring might restore coherence and meaning (Casebeer & Russell, 2005). However, we also found that teachers struggled to create and provide these narratives. The teachers could not function as critical gatekeepers since they could not control the content of the information that seeped into the classroom via their pupils' smart phones and social media (Thornton, 1991). Moreover, there were so many different stories and ideas floating around that the teachers felt overwhelmed in assessing the credibility of all information available. In addition, most teachers were already quite out of their depth regarding their knowledge of terrorism in general or in identifying age-appropriate strategies for teaching about terrorism. Consequently, several teachers experienced the dilemma of whether discussing the topic of terrorism would do more harm than good. In relation to Sondel et al.'s (2018) pedagogy for political trauma, we conclude that, in line with the first tenet of the framework, during disruptive moments, teachers should try to create a sense of safety in their classrooms. However, the unpredictable circumstances during a real-time terrorist attack made it hard for them to also meet the two other strategies defined by Sondel et al., let alone the fourth one added in this article. They struggled to find a stable and safe learning environment to calmly discuss civic dispositions (strategy 2) and stimulate critical consciousness (strategy 3), not only because of the emotional distress and volatile situation out on the streets but also because their information position was not adequate (strategy 4). They simply did not know enough about what was going on or how they could give a context for the attacks.

From a pedagogical point of view, all teachers favored an open discussion in which their pupils could vent their opinions and explore different points of view. In line with the second tenet of Sondel et al.'s (2018) framework, several teachers aimed to empower pupils to cultivate civic dispositions or values that are necessary to participate in a democracy. For example, Mike promoted civic action by stating that the pupils could take an active position against terrorism. Isabella tried to increase the feeling of safety among students by emphasizing that there are democratic institutions, such as the police, that could protect them against terrorism.

In relation to strategy 3, teaching critical consciousness, we found that several teachers wanted to protect the Muslim pupils from verbal attacks and harassment. Most teachers seemed to be aware of stereotypes and prejudices related to terrorism and Islam and deliberately tried to avoid these. Based on these findings, we conclude that, overall, our respondents followed Sondel's framework for political trauma pretty well. However, a limitation of Sondel et al.'s (2018) framework is that it assumes that all of the pupils

will be traumatized by the political event at hand. Therefore, it is relatively easy to enact such a framework when teachers are dealing with a homogenous group of pupils who are collectively traumatized. However, in this study, several teachers said that they were concerned about their pupils who might not be traumatized and instead may be radicalized by or supportive of what should be a settled event.

The aspect of teachers' confrontations with pupils with extreme ideas seems to be missing in Sondel et al.'s (2018) framework and needs further exploration. We think that explicating the tension between "open" and "settled" issues could bring some solace. For some teachers, it was disturbing to hear some of their pupils expressing radical ideas. Yet, this should not be confused with sympathy for the attack itself—especially if the pupils expressing these radical ideas came from a marginalized background and felt the need to defend their group or identity (Wansink et al., 2021). For the teachers, it was important to deal with the terrorist attack as a "settled" issue, to state and reiterate unequivocally that terrorism is widely condemned in society and that any kind of religiously or ideologically inspired violence is strictly prohibited by the law. On the other hand, on the underlying motives of the perpetrator, an "open" debate was and should be possible: blasphemy, freedom of religion, and freedom of opinion can and should be discussed in different ways (D. E. Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kunzman, 2006). Opinions can be articulated that are anti-democratic as long as there are no consequences for other people's rights and freedoms. It seems that establishing codes of conduct or classroom rules regarding controversial or "open" issues could serve to create a safe environment for both the teachers and the pupils when confronted with such polarizing issues as terrorist attacks. After all, a school is a normative environment where pupils should learn how to disagree in a way that allows for respect and moral decency toward each other (Journell, 2011).

Finally, we want to discuss the perceived lack of school leadership during the crisis. Teachers, like pupils, need guidance in situations of stress and uncertainty. The teachers and pupils were protected by the lockdown, but at the same time the teachers were unsure about how to reflect upon and discuss the situation with their pupils. Schools reacted differently, but none of the teachers could fall back on a protocol, which meant that some of the teachers found themselves in an unsafe situation.

This summary of findings leads us to our recommendations. Our first recommendation may seem obvious, but it is still a challenge: schools should develop protocols that guide their teachers through disruptive events, and these protocols should be tested, practiced, and rehearsed with the teaching team and leadership together. The second recommendation is that teachers should be encouraged to reflect upon their own emotions, morals, and educational beliefs and how these play a role in their reactions when they are confronted with trauma and extremism (Wansink et al., 2018, 2021; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). Related to this recommendation, when teachers discuss terrorism with elementary-school-age children, they have to learn how to attend to social and emotional issues and to recognize how identities come into play. They should also create a space for pupils to be able to voice their concerns regarding democracy, violence, and discrimination (Payne & Journell, 2019).

The third recommendation is in line with previous research and concerns the teachers' reported lack of knowledge and information about terrorism and how to discuss it in class (Bellows, 2016; Weeden & Bright, 2020). Almost all teachers struggled to find a framework that enabled them and their pupils to make sense of the attack and to interpret and contextualize what was happening around them. Hence, we propose that knowledge about the phenomenon of terrorism *as a historical category* (and in connection with that, as a "settled" issue) makes it easier

to come to terms with seemingly unique and shocking events, such as attacks. Putting terrorist incidents into a wider historical framework and adopting a historical perspective, rather than immediately engaging in a political or psychological discussion, can alleviate feelings of alarm and shock and may help pupils contain their fears of the unknown and the unpredictable (Casebeer & Russell, 2005; Lévesque, 2003). Adopting such a historical framework also means that attention is deflected from horror stories in the media, as historical statistics demonstrate that the chances of being involved in an attack are small. For children who may feel that an attack is always imminent, this knowledge gives some reassurance. We suggest that teachers should be offered a "historicizing perspective," one that tries to back them up with statistics and factual information on terrorist attacks, connecting present-day conflicts and incidents with historical precedents, and embedding these facts and incidents in a wider narrative of terrorist "waves" that come and go through time (de Graaf, 2018; D. Hess & Stoddard, 2011; Journell, 2018). In this way, pupils are triggered to expand their viewpoint and look into the past in order to learn where and how radical sentiments and political or religious violence arose before, how these bouts of violence waned again, and the best ways and means to counter waves of terrorism based on history. We acknowledge that this historicizing approach might be difficult for teachers to enact in real time. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that teachers can rely on this context and teach about historical instances of terrorism in a "calm" moment beforehand. Then, when acts of terrorism do occur, teachers can return to this historical context in conjunction with the other tenets of Sondel et al.'s (2018) framework. Of course, historical knowledge can be epistemologically and politically contested and can be taken up in significantly different ways by pupils with different backgrounds (Wansink et al., 2016), but such disagreements can be part of the historical contextualization.

In line with Lévesque (2003) and the teachers interviewed for this study, we think that knowledge about terrorism and a historical understanding of terrorism can improve the resilience of pupils in times of crisis and distress. Therefore, in the Netherlands, as in the United States, teachers should be given a sufficient amount of time in the formal curriculum to teach about the historical framework of terrorism (Bellows, 2016; Journell, 2018). We should not insulate our youth from trauma and terror but rather teach them the skills to positively affect their own lives and those of others (Berson, 2002).

The present findings provide a picture of what types of dilemmas elementary school teachers experienced when discussing terrorism with pupils during and shortly after a terrorist attack. To investigate the generalizability of our findings, the results of this study should be contrasted with similar research in other contexts. For example, we are curious to know if U.S. teachers faced similar dilemmas when responding to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol—a political act that should have been universally condemned but might be cheered on by Trump-supporting pupils. An important limitation of this study is that we could not triangulate what the teachers said with the pupils' voices or observations of the teachers in their classrooms. For future research, it would be promising if researchers could try to collect different types of data sources. Moreover, future researchers should try to speak to a more diverse group of teachers, as we were unable to speak to teachers from a Muslim background.

Finally, van Overmeire et al. (2020) found that discussions in class about terrorism did not help pupils who already had a distorted world image; in these cases, classroom discussions did not bring them much solace in coping with their emotions. Yet, for the large majority of the teachers and pupils alike, our research does point in a hopeful direction: most of them remained levelheaded during the lockdown and amidst a high-profile attack.

Against such a backdrop, the rewards and returns for further developing a pedagogy for political trauma, built on a sound informational and emotional base, seem to be promising.

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Appendix

Overview of the interview protocol. (The main topic was the recent terrorist attack in Utrecht, the Netherlands).

(1) What do you think terrorism is?
(2) For what purpose would you discuss terrorism with your pupils?
(3) What prevents you from discussing terrorism with your pupils?
(4) Do you feel competent to discuss terrorism with your pupils?
(5) Do you feel supported by colleagues or the school board in discussing terrorism in class?
(6) What pedagogical aspects do you take into account when discussing terrorism with your pupils?
(7) What types of pedagogical strategies do you use?
(8) Do you have any questions or comments based on this interview?